Winner of the Jnanpith Award 1989

QURRATULAIN HYDER

CHANDNI BEGUM

a novel

Translated from the original Urdu by Saleem Kidwai

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Chandni Begum is Qurratulain Hyder's last, most enigmatic and daring of her novels. It spans the period from the Partition to the time of the Mandir-Masjid dispute in Ayodhya in the early Nineties, consistently connecting the present to the past.

Centred around two prominent Lucknow families, the narrative closes in on the lives and struggles of Qambar, a romantic revolutionary, and the three women drawn to him—Bela, the daughter of a mirasi-bhand couple, desperate to break away from her tainted 'legacy'; Safia, the polio-stricken daughter of the Raja of Teen Katori, an independent 'educationist' dealing with the crushing rejection of her childhood betrothed and the demons that haunt her in its wake; and the eponymous heroine, Chandni Begum, destitute survivor of a once powerful landed family, looking for a way to get by respectably.

Hyder returns to her favourite themes and spaces—Partition, women entertainers, popular mysticism, the illustrious homes of Lucknow, the chawls of Bombay—to tell a rivetting tale, liberally sprinkled with entertaining characters and biting political and social comment.

Qurratulain Hyder is one of Urdu's greatest fiction writers. Her published work consists of four collections of short stories, five novels and several novellas. She has been a journalist, scriptwriter and broadcaster with BBC, as well as Producer Emeritus, AIR, and copywriter for an advertising agency. Among her many awards and honours are the Bharatiya Jnanpith, the Padma Shri, the Sahitya Akademi Award, and the Padma Bhushan.

Saleem Kidwai is a medieval historian, scholar and translator. He has co-edited *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (2000), a pioneering work documenting and exploring the indigenous roots of same-sex desire in South Asia; he has translated the singer Malka Pukhraj's autobiography, *Song Sung True* (2004) and *Mirror of Wonders and Other Tales* (2012), a collection of short stories by Syed Rafiq Hussain.

ALSO AVAILABLE

River of Fire : a novel

My Temples, Too : a novella

Fireflies in the Mist : a novel

Street Singers of Lucknow and Other Stories

Chandni Begum

a novel

QURRATULAIN HYDER

translated from the original Urdu by

SALEEM KIDWAI

women
UNLIMITED

an associate of
kali for women

Chandni Begum
was first published in English in India in 2017
by
Women Unlimited
(an associate of Kali for Women)
7/10, FF, Sarvapriya Vihar
New Delhi-110 016

www.womenunlimited.net

© Original Urdu, Qurratulain Hyder, 1989
© This translation, Saleem Kidwai, 2017

ISBN: 978-93-85606-11-3

Cover design: Amruta Patil

All rights reserved

Printed at Chaman Offset, New Delhi-110 002

Contents

1. Red Rose • **1**

2. Sanobar Film Company • **18**

3. Madhumalti • **50**

4. Kadambari • **78**

5. Bramble Garden • **135**

6. Kajli Ban: The Elephant Forest • **147**

7. Mountain God • **153**

8. Qasr e Shirin: Shirin Castle • **162**

9. Bohemian Girl • **173**

10. Char Khoont Mein Naubat Baje:
Kettledrums Play All Around • **198**

11. Discovery of a Cultural Hero • **217**

12. Alha Udal • **257**

13. Tipu Sultan Bar • **294**

14. Daughter of the Mountains • **314**

I
Red Rose

THE vast, low-lying tract along the river is crowded with multi-coloured flowers: four o' clocks, marigolds, balsams, cabbage roses, moon and sunflowers. Wandering grain merchants camp here and this is where Jumma the washerman dries his clothes. His donkeys graze among the flowers, and he also cultivates arhar daal here. Occasionally, the tip of his plough hits a decaying, rust-covered piece of metal, which he picks up, takes a good look at and then, disappointed, tosses it far away. The earthworms continue their labour in the powdery soil. Who cares about the lives or age of these earthworms, yet they spend all their time busily building their homes, piling up tiny pellets of wet mud into heaps. To one side, the cowherds and milkmen have planted vegetables. The earth is very fertile. Plant whatever in whichever season and it will grow.

*

Well-built, with silver-grey hair, black-framed spectacles, a Havana cigar in his mouth, Shaikh Azhar Ali was the classic picture of a successful and affluent barrister known for winning complicated property and land cases. His son, Qambar Ali, was a young man of modern times who made fiery speeches against private property in the Students' Union. In contrast to his father, he, the only son, was slightly built, pale-faced and pampered, with a slight stammer from his childhood which people attributed to the overpowering personality of his father. It was to disguise this stammer that he had practised the art of oratory and gradually became a student leader. His mother, Badrunnisa Azhar Ali, who was called Bitto Baji, was a social reformer. She used to give speeches about women's rights at

women's gatherings and was part of the delegations of prominent women sent to Red China, Europe and Egypt.

The mother, father and son, each in their way, was articulate and well established. It is said that even the mice in the house of a judge are smart. The barrister's old secretary was a poet with the nom de plume, Sokhta. Some people believed that Bitto Baji's personal maid, Al Hamdu, could any day have got a job as a lecturer teaching domestic science, because rivers of eloquence and rhetoric flowed from her all day to control the other servants in the house.

The retinue of servants resembled the delicate clay figurines depicting the serving classes as the potters of Lucknow sculpted them, usually displayed in a row above fireplaces and which, once upon a time, the English would take home with them.

In the last decades of Nawabi rule, this area was outside the city limits and was the property of Barrister Ali's ancestors. In colonial times, houses began to be built along the river. Barrister Ali's grandfather sold a significant portion of his property, and on the remaining land built himself a house. He planted mango and guava orchards, built a mud cottage, stables, a hen coop, a sundial and extensive servants' quarters in which now live Alauddin, the driver of the motor car, Ramzani, the cook, and Idu, the senior attendant, with their families. Al Hamdu, Bitto Baji's chief maid, was a widow. At the end of the row of quarters lived Natthu, the washerman, with his family. The cauldron in which they boiled clothes was built close by. Bhang grew in front of this quarter. The gardener, Bhagwan Din, and the watchman, Phatku, lived in the cottage in the grove. On Holi, they would grind the hemp buds and sing with abandon. Bitto Baji would have the flourishing bhang cleared, but it would grow back again. The enclosure for the buffaloes was next to the kitchen garden. A deer and a blue bull, a gift from Raghubir Prasad Singh, a hunter friend of Qambar's, were also kept there. Barrister Sahib himself used to hunt. On his return from shikar, he would invite friends for a feast of venison kababs. While Ramzani made the kababs, Al Hamdu would philosophically mutter: "Ah, the fate of this dumb animal! Saints meditate sitting

on its hide; poets compose verses about its eyes, but the poor beast ends up being scorched into kababs!"

Some people were fated to have everything—a river to wash their clothes in, fruits and vegetables from their gardens and trained servants to serve them. But things were changing. For instance, the Urdu script, the Progressive Movement and the survival of families. The families seemed to be caught in a morass.

The denizens of the garden were a part of the bustle of this house by the river—parakeets, mynahs, koels and brahminy ducks. All day there was an incessant stream of all kinds of visitors to meet Barrister Azhar Ali, well-known jurist, Bitto Baji, famous social worker and Qambar Ali, student leader. First, there were the famous taluqdars who would alight from their long cars in the portico to discuss their legal problems. Then there were the obese, adopted sons of Hindu rajas who were usually called 'Baby', wore silk kurtas and snow white dhotis and sparkling diamonds, and arrived in their carriages.

Suddenly the scene changed. The taluqdars and their begums along with their cars, palanquins and carriages disappeared. Soon even tonga and ekka carriages became rare. Instead, there was a flood of bicycles and rickshaws. These clients who entered the portico carrying satchels were now those whose properties had been declared abandoned because one of their relatives had migrated to Pakistan. Among these were many who earlier arrived in cars.

Azhar Ali would help, without any charge, the peasants who came to him. They too had been dispossessed because they had been cultivating the lands now declared abandoned by their owners. These grateful farmers would, by way of compensation, bring baskets of fresh vegetables or round lumps of jaggery and wait patiently under the mango trees. When it was time for prayer, they would go to the small, dilapidated mosque in the corner of the orchard to pray, then come back and continue their patient wait.

At the other end of the orchard, towards the river, there was an old peepal tree. Years ago, someone had recovered a round black stone from the river and set it among its roots and built a platform of

thin lakhauri bricks around it. Munshi Bhawani Shankar, Bhagwan Din and Phatku would pray there.

Apart from the dispossessed peasants, hordes of burqa covered, destitute, divorced women too descended on the house. These silent women, wrapped in black, as they passed through rows of two-coloured poppies, reminded Qambar Ali of the characters in the Spanish novelist Lorca's frightening tragedies. Often Munshi Sokhta would take them inside to the Begum who would try to help with their problems. The daughters of some of these helpless women had married Hindus. Sitting on a Turkish carpet in Bitto Baji's room with a betel box in front of her, Al Hamdu would roll betel leaf into little conical pyramids while expressing her opinions: "Begum Sahib, what can one do? Boys are becoming as hard to spot as fig flowers! All of them have left."

She would place the betel-leaf pyramids on a silver tray and give them to Begum Sahib who would then offer these to the burqa-clad women. They would pick them up with their fingers, bow their heads and thank her. One among them would say: "Bitto Baji, I have four daughters sitting at home. For Allah's sake suggest a match for them." She, in turn, would say to herself, I have only one son, may Allah keep him, but there are so many of these unfortunate girls. If he were to marry anyone of these, what a virtuous act that would be!

As he contemplated the worried faces of his father's clients, Qambar Ali became increasingly rigid in his political beliefs. For him, freedom from the British and bourgeois democracy was meaningless. How could his father now expect him to marry Safia Sultan, the youngest daughter of Anwar Hussain, the Raja of Teen Katori, to whom he had been betrothed since her birth?

Let's move on, for that stage has yet to be reached.

*

Some ancestor of the Raja Sahib, in a jungle of wood apples, had once fed a ragged, thirsty wayfarer three bowls of barley meal. It is said that that mendicant was a saint in disguise. As it happened,

by God's grace, a few days later the emperor of that time granted him an estate. This estate, in commemoration of the three cups of barley meal, came to be known as the principality of Teen Katori.

Malicious people referred to the Raja's three daughters as 'the three cups'. The eldest, Zarina Sultan, alias Jenny, had been in a troubled marriage and her husband had left her and migrated to Karachi. She, along with her three children, Shehla, Amina and Parvez, lived with her parents. The middle daughter, Parveen, alias Penny, was married over the telephone soon after she completed her BA and she too moved to Karachi. The third, Safia, was very pleasant looking and highly educated. However, she had been stricken with polio as a child which rendered her left hand unusable.

The white Teen Katori House and Barrister Azhar Ali's yellow house were situated practically opposite each other with the silver river flowing in between. When Safia's girlfriends sang, 'O river, flow gently for I have to cross,' she would smile. Now this irritated her. When Parveen Baji visited from Karachi she would complain, "Everyone there taunts me and tells me to watch out for my younger sister since all the girls here are marrying Hindus. I try and explain that it's only a handful among the population of eight crore Muslims who have done so, and not to make it sound as if it were a rule. If half the eight crore are women and if half of them are unmarried, then according to them, they are speaking of two crore girls. But who cares about the actual statistics!"

Listening to this, Rani Sulat Zamani shuddered. Safia would sit there frowning. The eldest daughter Zarina carried the subject further. "Most of the eligible boys in the best families who have stayed on in India, all of whom are well placed, are marrying Hindu girls with a vengeance; after all, it is only Hindus that the boys meet in colleges, offices, clubs and elsewhere."

"Keep your girls sealed off and this is bound to happen. You've even kept Fenny imprisoned," Parveen, alias Penny, would answer. Living in Karachi, she had become very modern and was a member of the Gymkhana Club where she went ballroom dancing.

Fed up with all this, Safia Sultan (alias Fenny) opened a school on the second floor of Teen Katori House and called it St. John's Convent.

The surge of ignorance, stupidity and idiotic aping of the West in new India saddened Begum Badrunnisa Azhar Ali a great deal. One day when she came to visit the Rani Sahib she saw the signboard for the school on top of the portico as she entered and took Safia to task. "For God's sake, Bitiya, you have studied at St. Agnes' but have turned out to be totally ignorant! Have you become a Catholic nun and opened up a convent with the permission of the Pope? What has happened to all of you? Bogus convents are being started one after the other!"

Irritated, Safia responded. "Bitto Chachi, if we do not call an English medium school a convent, no one will send their daughters to it. Now there is even a Durga Das Convent and Abraham Lincoln Convent. And Chachi, when I went to visit Parveen Baji in Karachi recently, even there I found convents on every street though it is an Islamic state. Even Parveen Baji's cousin-in-law has opened a convent and called it Pak Convent!"

Bitto Baji held her head in despair. "Even the Department of Education does not object to this dim-wittedness and fraud."

Safia kept silent. Raising ill-timed objections had been a habit with Bitto Chachi; she was always looking out for opportunities to correct others. Why didn't she advise her beloved son instead?

*

After graduating from the university, the beloved who lived across the river had become indifferent. Qambar had declared open war against tradition. Towards this end, he decided to bring out a fortnightly. To keep his beloved son busy in a harmless occupation, the father opened a large bank account. This was the golden era of Jawaharlal Nehru. Accordingly, the fortnightly was named *Red Rose*. The magazine was a hit the moment it appeared.

The principality of Teen Katori had been annexed, but the Raja Sahib still owned a small hotel in a hill resort, and a forest of

wood apple trees. His son, Arjumand Abrar Miyan, alias Bobby, was engaged to the daughter of a collector who wanted to discharge the responsibility of getting his daughter settled before he retired and settled down in Aligarh. Both families began preparing for the wedding. Bitto Baji was now tired of working for social reform. When she had taken on this obligation a quarter of a century earlier, she had had no idea where to begin. However, she had the support of a group of incredibly sincere, patriotic women who earnestly grappled with all forms of change. That era, too, suddenly disappeared. Most of these noble ladies became old and left for their heavenly abode. Their children, instead of idealism, believed in the path of expediency and compromise.

The passionate ones now carefully settled into comfortable positions.

Bitto Baji's husband and son were still idealists like her. Even when she spoke, it sounded as if she was making a speech. Once when she returned from Teen Katori House she felt extremely depressed, and at the dinner table said to her husband and son, "The present conditions of our community, as it is, have deteriorated and to top it all, laziness, disenchantment and lack of ambition have made things worse. And those who have the means are still squandering money. For one, I was disgusted to see Safia Sultan's convent school. And with the money that these people are wasting on Bobby Miyan's wedding, an industrial home could have been opened for destitute women."

Qambar Ali responded, "Ammijan, there is no point arguing with these decadent people."

Bitto Baji had picked up the idioms that Qambar Ali used: relations of production, decadence, revisionism, retrogression, and exploitation of the working classes. 'Value destruction and ruin' had not yet come into vogue, nor had the 'invisibility and isolation of the individual in the culture of production'.

The next day, Munshi Bhawani Shankar Sokhta, who was an old-fashioned man, returned from the temple erected on the estate

and entered the house. Thinking it was the right time, he began, "Begum Sahib, I met Kali Charan, the Raja Sahib's manager in Aminabad yesterday."

"Oh, hasn't Kali Charan gone to Nainital? I had thought the Raja Sahib had sent him there to manage his hotel."

"That is what he was talking about. If only Safia Bitiya's wedding could be arranged at the same time as Bobby's, he could return to Nainital and get the rooms ready for them."

"Bhawani Shankar, Bhaiyya has started to cringe at even the mention of wealthy heiresses. Can you call him for me?"

"Sarkar, Qambar Bhaiyya has gone to the press with Sharbari Devi."

An alarm bell rang in Bitto Begum's head. Sharbari. Karuna, Sarita, Shobha.... "Bhawani Shankar, this seems to be the new trend."

"Begum Sahib, it's not a trend, it's a squall."

These were daughters of equally matched parents—journalists, artists, classical dancers.

When interfaith marriages took place in the upper classes and among families of equal status, the parents usually kept quiet. The children of these couples were given indistinct names like Kabir, Rahil, Samir, Mona or Seema, or Russian ones like Mira, Zoya, Natasha. Eid and Diwali were celebrated as cultural occasions in their homes.

When Qambar Ali came home for lunch, he brought up the subject of Sharbari. "Sharbari was very annoyed today."

"What happened?" Barrister Ali asked.

"Miyanjan, she teaches Modern Literature to the MA class in the Department of English. Two of her students have got married and come to class with a lot of vermilion in their hair. Sharbari has been teaching them Sartre. She told them that they would never be able to comprehend Sartre if they used so much vermilion."

Barrister Ali smiled. "What is the connection between vermilion and Sartre?"

"Miyanjan, vermilion is a sign of the enslavement of Hindu

women, a symbol of superstition. Among us, it is glass bangles and in Hyderabad, glass beads. In the south, it is the mangal sutra.

"Beta, for married women such things hold great importance," Bitto Begum said.

"Why don't men wear anything then? If nothing else, they could wear a safety pin in their noses. Sharbari told these girls to wipe off the vermilion or she wouldn't teach them Sartre."

"Hai hai, asking a married Hindu woman to remove the vermilion from her hair! This Sharbari of yours sounds crazy, and she herself is a Bengali Brahman."

"Ammijan, women when they become widows have to break their bangles and wear white. Are all symbols meant only for them?"

Barrister Sahib kept smiling benevolently.

"One should respect one's cultural traditions if they do not do any harm," he said.

"Isn't vermilion harmful? How can a woman wearing it have a modern mind?"

Shaikh Sahib was very amused. After finishing his meal, he left for the courts. Bitto Begum then asked her son, "What is going on with this Sharbari?"

"She … is my co … comrade." Qambar would begin to stammer slightly when he was nervous.

"Any plans of marrying her?"

"Not at all, she is too argumentative."

"Shall we look for an intelligent girl for you? One who doesn't object to wearing red glass bangles?"

"Sure—but on two conditions. One, she should be highly educated and two, she should be from a poor family … and three, she should be beautiful."

"Will we be allowed to decorate the parting in her hair with glitter on the day of the wedding?"

"O…kay, but she shouldn't wear a nose-ring like cattle at the time of the nikah. That is a symbol of the enslavement of women."

*

"Mother and son are turning our home into the Sabarmati Ashram! What should I now say to Anwar Hussain? Bhawani Shankar, show me a way out." Barrister Sahib said to Munshi Sokhta.

"Now listen to this! Begum Sahib is going to Zafarpur today in search of a poor girl."

"Is there a shortage of them here?"

"She says charity should begin at home."

*

Alima Bano was a childhood friend of Bitto Baji's and had been extremely unfortunate. Hers was a familiar story—her husband had gone to Pakistan and divorced her from there. Alima Begum had finished school before her marriage and then earned a BA, BT. She taught in a school and got her daughter to finish her MA, and B.Ed. Mother and daughter lived in the town of Zafarpur in the two remaining rooms of their dilapidated ancestral home and were teaching in a private college. The owner and principal of the college made them sign receipts for a hundred and fifty rupees while she handed only eighty rupees each to them.

Zafarpur was where Bitto Begum's natal home was. She visited her younger brothers regularly. She went to see Alima Bano and talked to her in a roundabout way. Alima Bano couldn't believe what she was hearing. Bitto Baji was seeing the girl for the first time after she had grown up. Very sweet-looking. However, there was one drawback. The thick-lensed spectacles she wore covered practically half her face. Well, even the moon has its blemishes. Qambar Ali himself was no oil painting.

"Sister, what can I do. I have always been short of money and the electricity supply was disconnected. She had to study by the light of a lantern, and that ruined her eyes."

Bitto Baji kept quiet. The girl was appropriate in every way. She met all three of Qambar's conditions. Apart from this, as she was from a poor family, she would be submissive. When Bitto Begum returned to Lucknow, she showed a photograph of the girl, in which she was wearing a gown and holding a rolled up MA degree,

to Qambar Miyan. She had taken off her spectacles for the picture. She struck Qambar the moment he saw the picture. "This is just the sort of girl I wanted! Highly educated and from the working class."

"Yes, she is working class. An educational shark, masquerading as a college principal, has been economically exploiting the mother and daughter and many other teachers like them." Bitto Begum began to make a speech yet again. "In the next issue, you must also write a strong note about this racket in educational institutions."

"For sure, Ammi, and at the first opportunity I will also come to Zafarpur with you. I will meet this brave, courageous fighter and if I like her—and why shouldn't I—I, I will ma … marry her too."

Barrister Azhar had entered the room. After Qambar Ali left, he asked his wife, "What was this rubbish that the two of you were talking about?"

"You just watch. Right now it's a good way of distracting him from Sharbari Devi."

Qambar Miyan was very busy preparing the annual issue of *Red Rose*. He soon forgot this discussion about the girl from Zafarpur. His mother was engrossed in preparing for her trip abroad, she was going to Geneva to participate in the World Conference on Women. When she returned, having stopped in Moscow and Tashkent on the way, she found that her husband was paralysed.

After an illness of six months, Barrister Azhar Ali passed away.

Bitto Baji had been known for being extremely well-dressed with her crinkled coloured dupattas starched with mica glitter, fine silk ghararas; jasmine flowers in her ears and red or green glass bangles on her wrists and bright, beautiful and expensive saris. Now clad in white saris of khadi silk or suits of white ghararas, she appeared to wilt. On the urging of Rani Sulat Zamani, her other friends and most of all of Al Hamdu, who argued that she was after all the mother of a young man, may he live long, she did not break her glass bangles. After completing the ritual period of mourning for a widow, she got furiously busy in welfare activities in order to forget her sorrows. She went to Delhi to preside over a seminar on the rights of women. On the way back she halted at Zafarpur. She

emerged from the railway station, hired a tonga and went to the home of her brothers. She was stunned to see a massive lock on the main door. A weaver with a huge bundle on his back passed by on the street, calling out his wares. On seeing her he fell silent, wished her and moved on. Bitto Begum began to feel faint, and darkness seemed to descend on her. She held on to a rod of the tonga and gave the coachman an address in another locality where a distant relative of hers lived.

*

Banne Chacha was sitting on a reed stool in the portico reading *Qaumi Awaz*. After answering Bitto's greetings, he too, like the weaver, kept silent. Then he murmured, "What can I say, Bitto Bi, I urged them strongly not to, but they wouldn't listen. They said the armed forces are ranged, facing each other. Before the borders are closed—I argued that they were well settled here, but the idea had possessed them. The eldest left out of love for his daughter whom he had married off to distant Quetta. The parents pined for her all the time. And then there was the telegram informing them of her illness. They left immediately. The younger brothers said that they too would go along."

"They could have informed me. Had they lost all love for me?"

"No, no, Bitto …"

"They came for my husband's third and fortieth death rituals. They could have told me then."

"No, Bitto, they may not have told you because you would have tried to dissuade them and they would not have wanted to break your heart."

"As if they have greatly gladdened my heart now," Bitto Begum sobbed.

Banne Chacha put his arm on her shoulder. "Come and meet your Chachi and rest a bit."

Banni Chachi was sitting on the veranda getting the grain from their fields weighed. She too fell silent after she greeted Bitto Begum. Bitto sat on a small stool next to her.

"Last time, on my way to Europe I had come here. I noticed that my middle brother's stuff was packed, but his wife immediately said they were getting ready to go to Nainital. It didn't strike me that it was not the season to go to the hills. It means they were already preparing to leave."

Golu brought a tray of tea and placed it on the floor. Flies began to buzz around it.

"God forgive us when the sugarcane season arrives, these wretched flies attack all of Zafarpur. Let's go inside," Banni Chachi said. This Rohilla family spoke a western dialect of Urdu.

In the big room, the sunmica-covered furniture brought by the youngest daughter-in-law was glistening. Copies of the Quran, in new brocade covers, were kept on top of the Godrej almirah. On the walls were current and old calendars with the picture of a European cat playing with a ball of wool, and monograms of Allah and the Prophet. There was an embroidered fringe hanging across the fireplace and on it, in a glass case were Japanese dolls. A well set-up home. Bitto Baji sat on the bed and closed her eyes. Banni Chachi's daughter turned on the radio which was covered by a crocheted tablecloth, and tuned into Delhi. The news was being broadcast. Suddenly Bitto Baji's name was announced, "Inaugurating the session Begum Azhar Ali said ..."

"Oh, Bitto's name is being announced," Banni screamed. "Ayesha, go call him. They are speaking of Bitto in the news."

Banne Chacha came running but by then the news about the seminar was over.

"Oh, I didn't get to hear it," he said shaking his head. "But I listen to all your speeches on the radio."

"Come sit here, Banne Chacha," Bitto said. She was tired of their attempts to console her.

Outside the compound wall on the grounds below, some children were carrying tesu flowers and singing a doggerel:

Akkar celebrates Tesu, Makkar celebrates Tesu
Black coats rule Delhi; Skinner kick them out.

Banne Chacha shook his head. "They are still singing such doggerels mindlessly. These are the people who welcomed Skinner's regiments. Things are changing so fast. So much is happening without any thought," he sighed. "And even if they apply their minds to it, what difference will it make?"

Bitto Baji half-reclined on a pillow and waved away the flies with one hand. "The whole town is smelling of sugarcane juice. You are no longer used to this odour," Banne Chacha said apologetically. "This year I, too, by God's grace, have had a bountiful crop. The second sugarcane mill has now started running."

"Congratulations."

Bitto Baji's three brothers too used to talk to her about their farming. She sighed again. What will they now do there, in a strange land!

Bitto Begum had been deeply hurt by the ungratefulness and treachery of people dear to her. The loss of her husband was still fresh and this parting was a permanent loss. Now that they had migrated they would make caustic and sarcastic conversation when they visited. She had witnessed such scenes in many other families.

In the evening she sent a note to her friend, Alima Bano, and asked her over. Alima Bano came at dusk.

"You haven't brought your daughter along?" Bitto Begum asked. Alima kept quiet. Now that she had made an offer of her son, where was the question of bringing my daughter with me? We might be poor, it doesn't mean we have become so shameless that the girl should attend to her mother-in-law-to-be. Or has she become so western after all her trips abroad?

"Alima, they have all run away," Bitto said. "They didn't even inform you."

"When did they treat us as social equals," Alima answered. "Forgive me for saying this Bitto, your sisters-in-law and nieces were very different from you. Why would they be friends with us poor people?"

Bitto did not respond. She kept flapping her hand to keep the flies away. Then she said softly, "Alima, my husband is dead, and

my family has gone away. It doesn't matter. Only you, who are like a sister to me, remain. Now the two of us will live out our lives together."

Alima nodded. Her heart lit up with hope. She will soon get her son married to my daughter and take her with her to Lucknow.

Before Bitto could say anything, she suddenly experienced an outburst of convulsive sobbing and began to hiccup.

Banni Chachi came running from the kitchen and Banne Chacha came in from outside, hesitated at the entrance and put one hand on the doorpost, "Let her cry, she will feel lighter," he said gently.

Alima lifted her dupatta to cover her face and he retreated immediately. Sleep overcame Bitto, and there was a power breakdown.

"Tauba, all the electricity is being consumed by the booming factories," Banni Chachi grumbled. Ayesha lit lamps and lanterns. In the dim light, Alima found her slippers which had slipped under the divan, put her burqa over her head and said to Banni Chachi, "My daughter must be alone at home. I'm going now and will come again tomorrow."

When she woke up, the next morning Bitto had a high fever. The doctor visited but she refused to take any medicine. Sobbing loudly, she suddenly started screaming, "Hai, everyone has deserted me, my husband left me and now even my brothers. I'm all alone now! Hai, all alone..."

"Heaven forbid, Bitto," Banne Chacha scolded her. "Why are you saying such things? May your son have a long life. Enough of this...."

"All right, I won't lament anymore. I offer them as a gift to Bibi Sayyada," she said and fell asleep. A little later, she murmured in her sleep: "They even abandoned the graves of their ancestors."

Chachi, who was sitting head lowered, with one leg on the bed and the other resting on the ground, rolling betel-leaf, grumbled. "Whoever takes graves with him?"

Bitto Begum developed symptoms of a swelling in the brain.

Banne Chacha went to his sugar factory and made a trunk call to Qambar Ali. He had gone to Calcutta and Munshi Sokhta was in his village. He sent them telegrams, but by noon Bitto Begum passed away. The doctor said it was a brain haemorrhage.

Arrangements were made to bury her in her ancestral cemetery. At dusk, a handful of mourners, reciting the kalma, carried her corpse through the deserted, dusty streets of her hometown, littered with sugarcane husk and dry joints. Banne Chacha, carrying a halogen lamp, led the procession.

*

The people of the city had yet not recovered from the death of Azhar Ali, and the sudden death of a compassionate and popular woman like Bitto Baji caused much lamentation. The black burqa-clad women reappeared among the row of poppies for the last time, for the fortieth day funeral rites. A desolate Al Hamdu and Zaitun made all the arrangements. After the Quran-reading and meal following the reciting of prayers for the dead, the crowd of mourners left. Qambar Ali lay on an easy chair in the veranda, chain-smoking. Bhawani Shankar was sitting at the edge of the well. Begum Sahib had come to this house as a bride when he was a young man. He, too, had been married recently and he had brought his wife, her ornaments jingling, on an ekka-carriage from the village to meet Begum Sahib. For forty years, Bhawani Shankar had worked as a secretary in Barrister Sahib's office. He had spent these forty years associated with law cases and clients. He had carried Qambar Miyan around and taken him, perched on his shoulders, around Sikandar Bagh. He would drop him off at school. Like the parents, he indulged all his whims. His parents' pampering had ruined Qambar Miyan, and Munshiji too had played his part in that. How was Qambar Miyan going to deal with the world after his parents' death? Editing a magazine is an altogether different matter.

The servants were no longer in Al Hamdu's control. She would stand on the back veranda and scream, "Ramzani, what is this watery curry that you have cooked? Bhaiyya just tasted it and set it aside."

Sometimes she would scold Idu the bearer, "Arrey, you a denizen of the Chambal valley, why have you dusted the drawing room so carelessly, is this unpaid labour?" At other times she would run to Bhawani Shankar to complain. "Munshiji, Bhaiyya used to drink only when he was out with his friends. Now he drinks even when he is at home. He is scared of you. When you go and sleep in the turret, then he ...."

Qambar Miyan devoted all his time, money and energy to *Red Rose*. He set up the magazine's office at home. Some arches of the veranda were boarded up with plywood to create a newsroom. The assistant editor now used what used to be the waiting room for Barrister Sahib's clients. From a fortnightly, the magazine was made into a weekly. An Urdu edition called *Gul e Surkh* and a Hindi one called *Lal Gulab* began to be published. More staff was hired. The quiet that had descended on the house after his parents' death was dispelled by a new hustle and bustle. Earlier, clients used to wait under the flower-laden trees. Now it was journalists, political workers and progressive writers and poets of Urdu and Hindi. Every other day political and literary discussions and functions began to be held under the auspices of the Red Rose Forum.

Barrister Azhar Ali's house now came to be known as Red Rose. The public began to call it Lal Kothi.

2
Sanobar Film Company

ON a rosy winter morning, Qambar Ali was sitting in his office, which once was the grand chamber of his father, busy writing an editorial on the new foreign policy of Russia for *Red Rose*. Munshi Bhawani Shankar peeped in from behind the bamboo curtain.

"Bhaiyya, a troupe of entertainers is here." He came in and handed Qambar Ali a card.

Master I.B. Mogra
Music Director
Imani Building, Andheri, Bombay

Collyrium in his eyes, hair parted in the middle, a two-pieced cap, handlebar moustache, flower-patterned achkan, churidar pyjama, and Salim Shahi shoes, a box of betel leaves and a purse with long strings in his hand. Accompanied by a lady. Plump, fair, eyes like slices of mango, hair dyed red with henna, lilac coloured nylon sari, golden sandals.

A teddy girl, slender, rose-faced, tight qameez, churidar pyjama, short hair, glum-faced, dusky complexioned and wearing a lot of powder.

A teddy boy, hair cut in the style of Dilip Kumar, shiny shirt, tight trousers, a studded belt, a thick chain with a locket with Allah engraved on it around his neck, a bracelet around one wrist, pointed high-heeled boots. Qambar was dumbstruck. It seemed as if a comedy play was about to begin and all the characters were assembled on the stage for the first scene. When Miyanjan was alive, similar theatrical companies would come to him with their legal problems. This Company seemed to have come from somewhere

far and therefore seemed unaware of his demise. Master Mogra saluted him.

"Adabarz, Ustad," Qambar Ali returned the greeting. "Perhaps you don't know, but my father has passed away."

"May Allah drown him in his grace. This humble servant has come to see you at the behest of Mr Abrar Hussain of the principality of Teen Katori."

"Goddamn him," Qambar Ali muttered under his breath.

"There was a celebration in our community. To attend it, this nobody happened to pass through this city of poetry and music after a very long time. At a night-gathering, I had the honour of meeting Mr Bobby Miyan, and we talked about our interests. He suggested that I meet his old friend Shaikh Qambar Ali of Red Rose and that you would help us." He introduced his troupe.

"Wife—Chameli Begum Naaz (film star and poetess),
Daughter—Bela Rani Shokh (radio singer and poetess),
Son—Parizada Gulab (comedian)."

The wife and son bowed and greeted him. The daughter sat scowling. For the first time, Qambar Ali noticed that she seemed miserable and embarrassed.

Chameli Begum Naaz spoke. "I too used to sing for the radio and have broadcast from Lucknow. The Moonshine Theatrical Company of Kathgodam."

Qambar Miyan burst out laughing. He recalled the time when opera performed by a fictitious company was broadcast on the radio—yes, Moonshine. In an instant, he was transported back to his childhood when Ammijan listened to the radio with lots of interest. She would sometimes take him to the movies with her. There used to be a large hoarding on the Elphinstone Theatre in Qaiser Bagh announcing *Sant Tulsi Das* with Leela Chitnis, BA, carrying a pot on her waist, and with a large 3 in blue, meaning that the film was showing for the third week. Uffo, how long ago was that! And Kanan Bala, with clips in her hair, and Jamuna and Ram Pyari. Qambar Miyan closed his eyes for a moment, rested his head on his fingers and began playing with his pen. Then he opened his eyes and Master

Mogra, sensing him soften, immediately said, "Yes sir, for which Moonshine Theatrical invited the Bulbul of Bengal, Jahan Ara, and Kajjan from Calcutta, Ishrat Sultana and Bibbo from Bombay and Malika Pukhraj from Jammu."

"And the worthless me played the role of the girlfriend and sang in *Shirin Farhad*," said the Begum, sighing deeply.

These were pitiable people, and Qambar Miyan felt sorry for them. He decided to talk to them some more about the matter. "How interesting! I too saw Malika Pukhraj. We used to go to the Radio Station for a Scouts' programme, and I saw her leaving the studio. Her attendant carried a bag of charcoal."

"Yes, she used to smoke a huqqa."

"Ustad, this is my Bhawani Chacha, the famous poet and a great fan of theatre and nautanki."

Qambar Miyan suddenly noticed Chameli Begum Naaz's brown plastic bag. It had begun to give way on one side. He looked at all of them carefully. There was something wrong with all their clothes, darned in places. Mother and daughter were wearing fake jewellery. They were poor.

Munshi Sokhta joined the conversation from the doorway. "When Bibbo came here, she had come straight from Maharaja Patiala's court. Ask me, I know all about it. Haji Mujtaba Khan invited her for dinner. Haji Sahib had also invited Sahib and Begum Sahib. Master Mogra, have you worked in the theatre too? I heard Mukhtar Begum sing Agha Hashar Kashmiri's ghazal *Chori kahin khule na nasim e bahar ki* at the Corinthian Theatre. And Baby Noor Jahan was a chorus' girl in a Calcutta theatre. I'm talking about the time when Sarkar had gone to Calcutta for a court case. Makhdoom Bandi, too, was in the theatre."

"Bhawani Chacha, you had once taken me to the theatre at the large exhibition here when I pestered you."

"Yes, Paristan Theatre. Akhtari Bai Faizabadi was the heroine."

Qambar Miyan decided to abandon Russia's foreign policy and rang the bell. Idu appeared. He grinned when he saw this nautanki group.

"Will you get some tea immediately," Qambar Miyan said. He was now in the mood for gossip.

"Oh yes, Bhawani Chacha, you were saying—Akhtari Bai...."

"Yes, Bhaiyya, she used to stay in Tandon Nivas. On moonlit nights, a crazy man would go around writing his name with chalk on the roads of Lucknow. Next to it, he would add—the besotted lover of Akhtari Bai. Sometimes he would sit on the steps outside the Bata showroom and play the guitar. I have heard he was from a well-to-do family. What does it take to drive a man crazy? May God save us from bad times."

Sokhta had been observing this troupe suspiciously. Ignoring him Master Mogra said, "Sarkar, this slave of yours and his wife are both film stars. Nasim Sandilvi was filming *Rashid Dulhan* here. My wife could have got a role in it, but then she had too much work in Bombay. Then they began to shoot *Bismil ki Arzoo*. For that too there was some negotiation, but it's all a matter of fate. Huzoor, this is my beloved, fortunate, daughter, Gul e Abbas, whom we have educated in Panchgani. We are about to launch her on the silver screen as Bela Rani." He took out a paper from his pocket. "Will you please publish this advertisement in all three of your publications."

"Ustad, these are purely political journals and we don't publish such advertisements in them."

"At least look at it."

Qambar frowned as he began to read.

The first production of Sanobar Pictures, Andheri, Bombay
Gulzar e Muhabbat
Bela, Rabil Kumar, Prince Gulfam, Chameli Devi,
Lotun Kabutar
Story and Dialogue: Dev Tad Barabankavi
Songs: Bahar Phulpuri, Chakotra Garhwali
Dance Director: Chonge Maharaj
Music: I.B. Mogra, Madam Thumki
Assistant Director: Parizada Gulab
Producer-Financier: Adelji Bomanji Puchkhanawala
Director: Prince Gulfam

Qambar burst out laughing. Was this a film company or the Company Bagh?

"Yes, Sarkar, it's the Garden of Soloman," said the beaming Master Mogra.

*

Qambar Miyan wasn't surprised when he found the entire Sanobar Company present at the wedding reception of Abrar Hussain, alias Bobby Miyan. They staged the programme after dinner. There was mimicry by Master Mogra, Lotun Kabutar (Parizada Gulab doubled as Lotun Kabutar) and Chakotra Garhwali and Bela Rani's singing. For events like this, the little chabutra in front of the portico of Teen Katori House was used as a stage. After the mimicry, Bela Rani, in a glittering sequinned sari shimmered her way to the carpet and sat on it. Her mother, wearing a shiny gharara-suit and large, fake kundan jhumar and chapka in her hair sat playing the harmonium. Mogra and Gulab accompanied her on the sarangi and tabla. Bela Rani sang the poetry of her mother which was ghost-written for her by Bahar Phulpuri. She would sing this same poetry at mushaira-recitations, which were, since the failure of their qawwali party, their primary source of income. After the singing, Chaktora Garhwali played enchanting melodies on the flute.

Spectators offered them a lot of money and Mogra and company, except for Bela Rani, were very pleased.

Under the shamiana awning Qambar Miyan, as the best man, was sitting in the front row with the groom. The groom's younger sister, Safia, sat on a chair close by praying that soon it be Qambar, dressed as a groom, sitting on the sofa. In her mind, she had already begun drawing up a list of invitees. But Shaikh Qambar was behaving very inappropriately. He was staring at this cheap Bela Rani as if he had never seen such a wonderful songstress before or heard such singing. Even while singing the girl appeared miserable. Perhaps it was just her look—hard and haughty.

*

Qambar Ali had decided that two pages of *Red Rose* would be in colour. Since the colour pages had to go to press three weeks before the date of publication, he was bent over the artist's board, checking the final layout. A sub-editor came in from the veranda and said, "Comrade (Qambar Miyan had requested that everyone refer to him as Comrade), a lady has called and asked you to speak to her immediately. It's a matter of life and death, she says."

"Tell her to jump into a well five minutes from now," the artist reacted. "These women just don't leave Comrade-editor in peace. Qambar Miyan can you look at this size…"

"Wonder what this is about. I'll just be there."

In his heart, Qambar knew that it would be Bela and so it was. She was speaking fluently in English. "Consider this an SOS. You are a progressive man, and I have heard you praised by everyone in the city. These people don't let me out of their sight for a moment. Find a way that I can meet you without them being around."

Before he met her, Qambar Miyan assigned his chief reporter, Meraj Miyan, the task of finding out more about the group.

A week later, Meraj Ahmad came and told him, "Chameli Begum is a domni-singer by caste."

"Nonsense," Qambar interrupted him angrily. "What's this rubbish about caste? Yaar, you've turned out to be a reactionary!"

"Comrade-editor, you wanted a report. So here it is. Chameli Begum is a domni.

"Call her a folk-singer."

"And they are respectable people, not prostitutes. Chameli Begum's mother, Jafar Bandi, was among the marsiya-reciters of Nawab Hashmat Jahan Begum. Chameli's real name is Allah Jilai. Because she was stunning, the son of Nawab Sahib became infatuated with her, so the Nawab Sahib turned the mother and daughter out of the palace overnight.

"Jafar Bandi married Allah Jilai to the bhand-actor Mogra, and since his name was that of a flower, she was rechristened Chameli. For a few years, the couple earned a living by singing at weddings

and other occasions. Imam Bakhsh, alias Mogra, had ambitions to compose music for films, so he took his wife and children to Bombay."

"What children?"

"These very ones, Gulab and Gul e Abbas, alias Bela. In Bombay, he had to struggle a lot. Using the name I.B. Mogra, he assisted a few music directors. Out of necessity, Chameli Begum started doing small roles in films. It is said that she was so beautiful that she could easily have become a heroine if she had wanted. But Chameli was of good character and content to play the roles of sister and sister-in-law. When she began to gain weight she stopped getting even these side roles. She then set up a stove under the banyan tree in the courtyard of a studio and started selling kababs, qorma and parathas. She got to know a hero through her qorma. This hero was a crazy guy. He adopted Gul e Abbas and sent her to study in Panchgani. She had to return from there soon after because the hero himself ended up under the banyan tree in the studio courtyard. But by now Mogra had said he would launch Bela in films in the same way as Nargis had been launched. He didn't succeed. The poet Bahar Phulpuri suggested that he form a group of female qawwali singers. Therefore, on the lines of Shakila Bano Bhopali, Bela Bhawnagari and Party was created. The mother and daughter duo began to sing qawwalis. A Parsi gentleman, Adelji Bomanji Puchkhanawala used to attend their performances frequently. He owned race horses. Bahar Phulpuri talked him into financing films."

"Bhai, this seems like a very shady set-up. But we should investigate how relations of production relate to this situation."

"Yes, for sure. And it would be easy to meet Bela. Just send a message to Master Mogra that you liked her performance at the wedding and you would like to do a special feature on her in all three publications, *Red Rose*, *Lal Gulab* and *Gul e Surkh*, and that she should come to the office on so-and-so date."

"Fine, yaar, you are an intelligent man. But don't say anything to Munshi Sokhta just yet. He still doesn't approve of this troupe."

Qambar decided on the title of the feature: Women Qawwals: India's new Popular Artists.

The terms 'peoples' artistes', 'popular singers' are very powerful. There is a latent contempt in using caste terms like dom, dhari, mirasi, bhand. Folk singer, folk artiste, changes this image.

The photo session and interview were fixed for Saturday.

Qambar sent Munshi Sokhta on official work to Allahabad, though the article from an economic expert in Allahabad could easily have been requisitioned by post or telephone. Munshiji however, was no fool. He had sensed some things during the wedding of Bobby Miyan, and before he left, he instructed Al Hamdu to keep an eye out during his absence.

At the appointed time, Bela, along with her parents and brother, came and sat down in the drawing-room of Red Rose. These three did not know any English. Mogra could just about scribble his signature and Parizada Gulab had studied till class one. As planned, the staff photographer, after he set up his equipment, said that there was something wrong with the camera and they postponed the session to the next day. A few days passed thus. Photographs were also taken of Parizada who explained that he came to be called 'the son of a fairy' because his mother was referred to as Itar Pari —Perfumed Fairy—as she was so beautiful. Why wouldn't he, therefore, become famous as Parizada Gulab? He had been cast in female roles in an old style theatre company in Surat and had got work in Gujarati plays in Bombay.

*

These were very entertaining people; as intelligent and talented as they were unfortunate.

"Why is an artist so miserable in our capitalist society?" He started writing the article, but then realised that he needed to speak to Bela at length to get the complete picture. Munshi Sokhta had returned from Allahabad, and he was worried that the staff of the magazine would begin to gossip. Al Hamdu had already displayed

her hostility towards them when they arrived for the second time for a photo session. The old lady had come in and told him. "Bhaiyya, they have come."

"Who?"

"That very Master Mogra who roams around with his mouth open like a wolf."

Therefore, it wasn't appropriate to invite Bela home. His parents had been members of the best clubs and he could take her there, but because of his progressive politics he had surrendered his membership from these bourgeois establishments. He couldn't take her to a wayside eatery either. And if he were to sit with her in Kwality, the whole city would say that he was frolicking with two-bit starlets the moment his parents had passed away. Everyone talks without knowing the truth. He thought of a way out—a long drive, taking a wire recorder with him.

Of course with the permission of her parents and with Parizada Gulab as the chaperone.

"I am all prepared," said Parizada, stroking his studded belt. "I have travelled with the nautanki and our qawwali party and have toured all of Maharashtra and Gujarat often, have spent nights in villages and hamlets and therefore always carry my Rampuri switchblade with me."

Qambar Miyan was suddenly irritated. I've got myself into a soup because of my sympathy for peoples' artistes, he thought. What is this talk of knives and daggers? But it is too late now. With a picnic hamper, flask and wire recorder, he drove to Abdul Rahman's bakery where Mogra was staying.

Wearing slacks and an ugly scarf as a turban, Bela Rani looked smart as she emerged and sat in the car. Gulab took his place on the back seat. Mogra and Chameli said goodbye from the balcony. Qambar was embarrassed and said to himself, damn it, the whole locality is watching. Who doesn't know Qambar Miyan in this city?

But he did not regret going on the long drive. While talking to Bela, he was very impressed by her graciousness and pride. She was an incredibly sensitive and unfortunate girl and an artiste in the real

sense. And from what she told him about herself and her family, he found new insights into analysing society. In actuality, till now, he knew nothing about the lives of ordinary people. He was born in a large house, was educated in Mussourie, and had been living a comfortable life. What did he know about how people in the slums lived, or those filthy lanes or the dark mud houses of villages? He suddenly realised that he was just an armchair leftist.

As soon as they emerged from the city, they saw an old gateway.

"That's the haveli of Hashmat Jahan. For no fault of theirs, he expelled my mother and grandmother from here at a moment's notice."

"Bela, I apologise on behalf of all of them."

"We have struggled hard in these streets and localities. We used to come here to sing for engagements, weddings and all religious ceremonies. At weddings, Amma was often asked to sing one song:

The price to pay was very high
For this chunri in my father's home
For sindoor too
And then I paid the price again
When I had to leave my father's home.

Vermilion—he remembered Sharbari's argument. He slowed down the car and said, "This is the cause of all the trouble. The economics of vermilion is connected to our production relationships."

"Amma made me wear a frock with gold lace and took me to these festivities. I had just that one dress for these occasions. She also made me wear a brocade cap and put an enormous amount of soot in my eyes. We would always sit at the entrance, next to the heap of footwear. Amma made me stand and sing. The ladies would sometimes listen to me with great interest and at other times snub me—'O, you, keep quiet and let us talk'—and I would get scared and go and sit in Amma's lap. We used to eat with the servants, and Amma and Nani would wrap kababs and sheermals in their dupattas and take them home. Outside, among the men, Abba would perform his mimicry and imitate the sounds of animals."

"Abba imitated frogs very well," Parizada Gulab added. "There is this frog croaking on this side of the river. From across the river, another frog croaks in response. You must make him imitate this conversation of frogs for you."

The car left the city and entered the jungles.

Qambar acclerated the car. The wind started blowing faster.

"That day there was a strong wind, too," Bela began again. "We were sitting in this spacious third-class railway compartment. In those days the third-class compartment was very big, and there were very few passengers.

"There were the four of us and a couple of other travellers. Abba was taking us to Bombay.

"It was the monsoons, and there was a lot of greenery on both sides of the track. I was turning the pages of a recent edition of the *Indian Listener*, which I had borrowed from a passenger. On the cover was a Rajasthani painting commemorating Janamashtami in which, on a night lit by lightning, a woman was running to save herself from the rain and thunder. The lightning was depicted very realistically.

"The ocean appeared at a distance. Mounds of salt, green hillocks and a cluster of coconut palms—Abba said we are heading towards paradise. Bombay is called the bride among cities. And it is heaven on earth.

"Rain clouds floated over the green stretch of the western ghats. Then two-storeyed houses with tiled roofs appeared—and then the ghati women, as in the pictures, wearing eight-yard, blue and purple saris with abandon and with flowers in their buns.

"A long-haired, slim young man dressed in a sherwani, who appeared to be destitute, went and stood in the open door of the compartment. He had boarded the train at Jhansi. When Amma spread newspapers on the seats and opened her tiffin-carrier, Abba, as was his habit, invited him to join us for the meal. He came and sat down quietly and shared our parathas and minced meat. After thanking us, he went and sat next to the open window and started

to hum a poem. Abba asked him his name to which he answered Bahar Phulpuri, as if he were saying he was Jigar Moradabadi.

"Abba asked him if he came from the village Phulpur in Allahabad district, to which he replied, 'Sahib, you have fed me, which doesn't mean that you can ask me personal questions and that, instead of poetry, I should talk about irrelevant things throughout the journey.'

"Again he stood in the open door and started singing. He would hold the bars on the door and swing outwards. Amma would say, 'Allah have mercy! Oh bhaiyya, why are you risking your life?'

"He kept standing there smoking cigarettes. Bombay's local stations started to pass by.

"Near the city, on a compound wall, Abba saw, written with lime in large letters, both in Urdu and English, the words Bhawnani Productions. He put on his cap and said, 'My heart tells me to get off the train here.'

"When the train stopped at the next station, we alighted carefully on the platform with our various bundles, parcels and trunk. The train departed and with it Bahar Phulpuri, his hair flying in the wind.

"Master Imam Bakhsh's intuitions took us to many dead ends.

"Before we left for Bombay we had visited the dargah at Bahraich. There Abba met a Khan Sahib who was bathing in the Anarkali lake. He was an instrumentalist at Kanch ki Bangalia, Pawan Bridge, Bombay, and he gave Abba his address. We reached his house. After that, we went from pillar to post. Those were the last days of Saigal. Following his intuition, Abba dressed up as Saigal in *Street Singer*. He hung a harmonium around his neck, made Amma wear earrings similar to Kanan Bala's and somehow managed to barge into a studio. Both got the job of dancing like Mumtaz Ali and Shahzadi used to. He found a tiny room in an old chawl in Nagpada for a rent of ten rupees a month."

Bela suddenly switched from proper Urdu to speaking the dialect of Bombay.

"Sarkar, I'll tell you," Gulab leant over from the back seat. "Amma began to get the role of the heroine's friend. Huzoor, in those days the advertisements carried a list of cast members—Jillo Bai, Amina Khatoon, Charlie, Ghauri, Dixit. Amma and Abba's name—Chameli Devi and Master I.B. Mogra—started featuring in such ads. Our dreams had come true. Abba, wearing a jute beard, playing a sadhu or faqir would pass by in a shot singing an appropriate song," Gulab laughed uproariously. "Dhumi Khan had become famous and Jhande Khan was scoring hits and Abba was convinced that he, too, would become famous as Ustad Mogra Khan. But he was unfortunate. Anyway, Huzoor, Amma..."

Qambar Miyan interrupted him. "I've told you all so many times not to address me as Huzoor or Sarkar," and got up to return to the city.

"Amma got the second lead in a C grade film. We decorated our kholi according to our increased means. I hung up a tiny mirror, shaped like a dressing table, on the wall, put paper flowers in glass vases and planted flowers in empty ghee tins and hung them on the veranda. Abba bought an old bedstead with a frame and flowered tiles on its headboard. Since Amma was, so to speak, a star, she slept on it and Abba slept on the floor. Gullu Bhai would sleep under the bed and my bed was made on the roof of the bedstead. Large and well-to-do families spend their entire lives in such tiny accommodations in Bombay. The chawl system has its own culture. Have you ever been inside one?" Bela asked.

Slightly embarrassed, Qambar replied, "No."

"It had a drain in one corner, and a stove with a rack for utensils above it, in another. An aquarium with coloured fish and a showcase were considered status symbols in the kholis, and we acquired both. Amma kept her glittering shoes and clothes in the showcase and had a bulb fixed in it. Our Memon and Khoja neighbours, wearing long frocks, would come and stand in the doorway and Amma used to proudly show them her costumes. Our family became well known in the entire chawl. Our lives developed a routine. Early morning Amma and I would put the stove out in the veranda and cook our

food. We would pour the tea we had boiled into glasses and drink it. Gulab would go to Mughal's shop and bring warm, fresh bread, butter and eggs. After breakfast, we would put the food into tiffin-carriers. Amma and Abba would take these and head for the railway station. Both worked in the same studio. I would grab my satchel and go to the municipality's Urdu school. Gullu Bhai would loaf all day. Abba persuaded him and got him a job as a light-boy in the studio. From there, he ran off to Surat with some Gujarati actors.

"Amma was now getting the roles of sister-in-law or mother in run-of-the-mill films. Then she fell very ill and was in bed for a whole year. All that they had earned we spent on her treatment. When she recovered, there was no longer any work for her. Under the banyan tree at the same studio she put some stoves and started cooking qorma, kababs and parathas. Amma's delicious food became a hit. I would get a pail of water and wash the dishes. Gullu Bhai who had returned from Surat would carry plates of food inside. Abba would collect money from the customers.

"Through her qorma, we made the acquaintance of the hero of B grade films, Prince Gulfam. The first time he saw me, he began to cry. He was a theatrical man. Qambar Sahib, have you seen any of his films?"

"No."

"He was a veteran actor who used to act mostly in costume dramas. He powdered his face lightly, used faint lipstick, and plucked his eyebrows. He also wore pearls in his ears. He was a very good man."

"That's fine but why did he cry when he saw you?"

"First he cried, then he laughed. Like Hatim Tai. He said I looked exactly like his beloved daughter who had passed away and that I reminded him of her. 'From today you are His Highness' daughter and from now on all your expenses are His Majesty's responsibility', he said. Prince Gulfam had acted so often as an emperor that he had begun to speak like one. With folded hands my father said, 'Your Highness, we want to educate her in an English medium school, but we don't have the means'. He enthusiastically

said, 'We will educate her in Panchgani and then launch her like Nargis'.

"But Prince Gulfam's style of acting had become passé. His last picture failed. I returned from Panchgani after spending just two years there because Prince Gulfam now had to come and sit under that same banyan tree where crowds of other out-of-work actors and extras waited all day."

Gulab and Bela gathered all the things and put them back in the picnic basket.

"One day, in this crowd, Bahar Phulpuri ran into Abba. He still looked terribly off. But he had snubbed Abba so rudely in the train that Abba asked him no personal questions, like, where he had been all these years and what he had he been doing. Gullu Bhai had once told us that he had seen Bahar Sahib in the slums of Mahim at an aunty's liquor den, but Bahar Sahib was totally drunk and did not recognise him. Gullu Bhai also told us that some other famous poets came there to drink. Now Bahar Sahib himself said he was on the staff of a famous lyricist for whom he ghost-wrote songs. He also said that if he were to find the right partners he would form his team.

"He would often come to Chameli's eatery. One day he told us that he had left home with only ten rupees in his pocket and those he had saved for his initial days in Bombay. 'I was starving, and you fed me a meal on the train. I will never forget this favour, and I will repay it by launching beloved Gul e Abbas', he promised.

"'Anyone who has planned to launch her has sunk himself', Abba said to him. 'Miyan', he advised him, 'stick to your work, at least you get a regular salary'. Bahar Phulpuri countered and said, 'Listen to me, these days there is a high demand for female qawwali singers and the supply is meagre. I have carefully studied the mushaira-qawwali market and can tell you the current star value of every poet because our beloved mother tongue, Urdu and its literature, has been turned into an entertainment industry in India. So now I will call dear Gul e Abbas, Bela Bhawnagari to match Shakila Bano Bhopali, and we will form our qawwali party'."

"Bahar Sahib seems to have had the incredible talent of renaming people on the spur of the moment," Qambar Ali commented.

"So our qawwali party was formed. We were very successful at first. Chakotra Garhwali, the comedian, joined the party too. Bahar Sahib had also given him his name. We started touring and went as far as Aurangabad and Karnataka. But then the supply of lady qawwals too grew with the demand and the competition increased. The prosperous Qureishi community of Bombay were patrons of both free-style wrestling and qawwalis. Qawwali even became very popular among Gujaratis whose mother tongue was not Urdu. Our programmes were usually organised in the open air theatre of Sabu Siddiq Polytechnic. Titles of 'Qawwali King' and 'Qawwali Queen' were awarded. A Parsi gentleman frequently came to these programmes."

"Adelji Bomanji Puchkhanawala," Qambar said interrupting her.

"Bahar Sahib talked him into producing a film for us."

"Inshallah, we will begin work on it as soon as we return," Miyan Gulab informed him from the back seat.

"The owner of the bakery in Rakab Ganj, where we are staying, is also a fan of our qawwalis. He has bakeries here, in Bombay and Poona, and he always comes for our programmes. He had requested that whenever we returned to Lucknow, we should stay with him."

The city was drawing near. Qambar stopped the car in Nishat Ganj and said to Gulab, "Bhai, will you please get me a packet of Gold Flake." He took out some money and gave it to him.

Gulab got out of the car obediently. "If I can't find Gold Flake will some other brand do?"

"No, not at all. Look for that brand."

He moved towards the shops. Bela sighed deeply and leant her head against the seat. Out of politeness and to keep the conversation going, Qambar Ali said, "Now the fortunes of Bahar Sahib too will change because of Sanobar Pictures."

"Those have already changed. His boss, the poet, lives in his

luxury flat on Pali Hill and owns three cars. For years poor Bahar Sahib has been living in a balcony. He has a beautiful voice. His singing has become a hit in mushairas, and organisers invite him from far and wide. The poor guy, out of loyalty to us, now insists that he will only accept invitations if they also invite Chameli Begum Naaz and Bela Rani Shokh. Once, when he had returned home, his parents got him married. He couldn't bring his wife to Bombay but was now saying that as soon as he finds a room, he will bring his wife with him. All this is a matter of good luck, bad luck."

"There is nothing called luck. These terms are all the dissembling of capitalists."

"Qambar Sahib, a lot of Jews lived in our locality. These Marathi-speaking Israelites were educated people—lawyers and doctors. The Baghdadi Jews spoke Arabic at home. Most of them were poor and traded in old clothes. Every evening they would gather on a bench in front of Mughal Restaurant on the street corner. The fat and flabby Irani would keep sending them tea and they would eat water-melons and throw the rinds on the rubbish heap. Gradually, all of them migrated to Israel. Daud Nasrullah, a taxi driver, lived in our chawl. His wife was called Rebecca and his daughter, Rosa. His old mother's name was Hannah. Rebecca was a typist in the Fort area. Everyone addressed Daud Nasrullah as Bhai, and he was a very kind-hearted man. When Amma fell ill we had no money, so he took her to the hospital regularly without charging any fare. His son had already left for Israel and was a soldier in the army. Rosa put up a photograph of him in his uniform, carrying a gun, on the wall. After seeing that photograph Gullu told Amma that she should never sit in his taxi and if this idiotic Bela ever visited them, he would break her legs. These people are our enemies. Personal relations and neighbourliness have no meaning in the face of communal enmity.

"Daud Bhai's ninety-year-old mother was 'old Mama' for the entire chawl. The Marathas used to call her Hanna Tai, the South Indians Hanna Amma, the Gujaratis Hanna Ben or Ba and the Muslims, Hanna Bai or Hanna Bi. For thirty years she had not

spoken to her good-tempered daughter-in-law. Wearing a white gown she would sit in an easy chair, stitching round caps for worshippers at the Byculla synagogue. Sometimes she would mutter bad luck, bad luck in Arabic.

"I was scared of her. She was a crazy old woman, like an evil spirit.

"Our qawwali party failed. Rock and roll type of qawwalis became popular. Abba was a traditional musician and did not agree to us singing those. The other commercial male and female qawwals got large orchestras together—drums, electric guitars, etc., while we still had the same tabla and harmonium. Nor did we have the capital to modernise our group. On stage, Amma would still wear the worn-out embroidered saris from her time in films. The last time we performed was in Andheri. There, because of our shabby get-up and traditional qawwalis, we were booed. I cried a lot when we returned home. Amma who was used to failure, just sat quietly on her haunches next to the stove and began boiling tea while I continued to shed tears. Late in the night Bahar Sahib came to console us. He said that the booing was organised by a group which wanted to drive us out of business. Abba put out some metal chairs in the chawl's common veranda. Bahar Sahib lit a Panama and said he was trying to talk to Adelji. 'Prince Gulfam has been very kind to Bela, and he has made her life by sending her to Panchgani. He has now become infirm, and we can repay him for his favours by getting him to direct the film and also to act as the father in it. I will begin writing the story and dialogues under the pen name, Dev Tar Barabankavi. Now all we need is money from Adelji. Till then, make do with your earnings from mushairas'.

"After he left, Abba, Amma and Gullu went to sleep. My husband-serving mother would now sleep on the floor. Because Abba was getting old and he needed rest, he slept on the bed and Gullu on its roof, and I under it.

"When I went to bring in the chairs from outside, I just stood against the railing and started to cry again.

"We used to live on the fifth floor. At the end of this floor was

Nasrullah's kholi. Down in the courtyard there is a blind-well. It is said that smugglers hid their goods in it. It was frightening if you looked down into it on a dark night.

"I was leaning on the railing, looking at this well, when I heard a sound. It was a pitch-black night and the whole chawl was silent. When I looked around, I saw old Hannah next to me in her white gown, looking like a ghost. Often she would spend the entire night in the easy chair which was kept on the veranda outside her room. She said, 'Girl, why are you crying, just jump into the well'.

"I got scared, but she kept talking. 'Listen to me', she said. 'There is either bad luck or good luck in life, no third option. My husband came here from Iraq. On the same day, on another ship, his brother went to America. There his family now lives in luxury. I have spent fifty years in this kholi and my luck hasn't changed. My son continues to be a taxi driver. He did not become one of Bombay's big businessmen like Sir David Sassoon. Now my grandson has joined the Israeli army. If his luck is bad, he will get killed. If it is good, he will stay alive and die of old age.

'I always go to our synagogue in Byculla and pray that I am in Jerusalem next year. If my luck is good, then next year I will be there. Otherwise, I will die here. Young girls should be happy, but you always cry. If you don't see any reason for laughing, then jump into the well this minute. If your luck is bad, you will die the moment you fall. If it's good, then you will find gold biscuits. Bring them up'. Then the old woman put her hand on my shoulder in such a way that I thought that she was about to push me. I shuddered and drew back. She began muttering in Arabic and walked towards her easy chair.

"She died a few days later. Her daughter-in-law Rosa smiled and told us that Mama was a hundred years old, but she lied about her age and said she was only ninety. Five or six months later, Daud Bhai, Rosa and Rebecca emigrated to Israel."

Gullu came back with the cigarettes.

*

"There is a letter from Puchkhanawala. He is ready to invest money and has asked us to come immediately. To sit on the story."

"Oh, ho—wonderful! Congratulations. But how does one sit on a story?"

"Never mind—listen to me. I am calling from a shop. I just told Amma that I was not going to act in any picture-victure and she thrashed me."

"Thrashed you? The day before yesterday on the picnic you never mentioned any violence."

"How could I, with Gullu sitting there? Amma says, don't get taken in by Qambar Miyan, I know these aristocrats well. Even if he marries you, he will discard you in a few days."

Qambar Ali was startled. Where was there any talk of marriage? He began to stammer out of nervousness. "A … I, that is … I never said anything about…."

"Amma has caught on. Abba, Abdur Rahman, the baker, the neighbours, too."

Panicked, Qambar Miyan broke out in a cold sweat. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his face.

"Now they want to take me to Bombay immediately."

"Just like in masnavi *Zehr e Ishq*, among themselves they share advice, to send me to Banaras."

"You think this is a joke!"

"You should go back. This is a golden opportunity to become a star."

"What sort of a progressive man are you? Are you still suggesting this after hearing my entire story? Do you know that Puchkhanawala is a capitalist to beat all capitalists? He is a scary old man."

"But you said that you and your mother had always led very respectable lives."

"That's true. But the situation has changed now. What a coward you've turned out to be. Revolution etc., are empty slogans for you. I used to think you are a true blue revolutionary."

Qambar Ali kept quiet for a moment while he thought about what she had said, but she kept saying, hello…. hello.

Then she said, "On the way to Bandra, at one place in the slums live destitute whores. At night when the local trains pass, they hold up a lantern and stand in their doorways. When there is a famine in Andhra or somewhere else, their numbers increase. At a particular place they are auctioned, and madams bid for them and buy them. That is the worst face of capitalism. But even its nicer forms are very frightening."

Suddenly, Qambar Ali spoke firmly, "Al … alright you … you listen. On Saturday ev…evening at seven come to where the bird trappers sit with their cages under the banyan on Daliganj Road. And somehow get rid of Parizada."

"These days Abba and Gullu go to the mosque for their evening prayers and don't return till after the night prayers. That will be the best time. But make sure you come—this is a matter of life and death for me."

"Bela, don't mouth dialogues—please." Qambar Ali was exasperated, and he put down the receiver and sat with his head in his hands.

*

Raja Raghubir Prasad Singh, the man with a double-barrelled name, had gone to a different school in Mussourie but had been with Qambar Ali at a scouting camp. He was a jolly guy and even though he wasn't in the least bit interested in politics and Qambar was a political person, Raghubir Prasad Singh was an extremely loyal friend to Qambar Ali. This loyalty was a part of his feudal nature. He had been a boy scout, was a hunter and a Rajput of the old school. His eyes twinkled whenever he heard of any dangerous enterprise.

Qambar Ali rang him. "Yaar, I have to save a poor woman who has been mistreated by society. Will you help me?"

"Neck deep in water…?"

"Come to Red Rose in the evening."

"First tell me if you like the girl," the young Thakur asked the moment he sat down on the sofa. Idu laid out the drinks on the green stone table.

"Yes, I do."

"Won't her parents be happy that she is marrying into such an established family, and marrying a foolish man at that."

"The filmi parents? You don't know their mindset," Qambar picked up his drink and spoke with such authority as if he had himself been born into the film world. He was feeling delighted at his freedom. Would he have dared to drink and so openly discuss plans of kidnapping and marrying a nautanki actress if his parents were alive? The very next moment he was embarrassed at his baseness for feeling happy at Miyanjan's and Ammijaniya's death.

Raghubir Singh stroked his moustache and picked up his drink. "To success!" Both raised their glasses.

"All right, plan number one," Qambar spoke after some time. "You know Dr Janki Nandan, my old friend? He has opened his clinic, which also has an operation theatre."

"Oh my God! So, this is the problem," Raghubir Prasad said in alarm.

"Arrey bhai, no. Damn it! Listen to me. Bela will pretend that she has a severe stomach ache and will get her family to call me. I will send Janki who will diagnose it as appendicitis and immediately take her to his clinic. While the parents and brother wait outside, inside the theatre will be the groom, maulvi and witnesses wearing white face masks and gowns. We will be married immediately, and the two of us will disappear."

"And then Janki and you will be arrested for fraud and kidnapping. Brilliant! I'm afraid, Qambar Ali, that you are becoming more idiotic by the day. Hanging around with these film people you too have been influenced by cinema. You have written the scenario of an entirely third class film. Forget it."

"Then what shall we do?" asked Qambar dejectedly.

"Let me think," Raghubir Prasad took his glass, reclined on the sofa and closed his eyes. Fifteen minutes later he sat up and asked. "Is Bela an adult?"

"Much more than an adult. Bela must be twenty-five or twenty-six."

"I will arrange a performance of the *Inder Sabha* at my house in Chinhat."

"Waah! 'A female ascetic appears in fairyland dressed as a fairy…!'"

"We will secretly have a maulvi and witnesses waiting on the second floor. But before that, you must talk to Masterji. Only if he refuses."

"Masterji is a father from the film world—greedy and selfish. He wants to live off the wealth of Puchkhanawala."

"But you say he is a respectable man and not a professional pimp."

"Absolutely, but…."

"This Puchkhanawala is a strange name. Like our Mr Adi Dadabhoy Dhondy of Shirin Castle."

"And his son-in-law, Captain Captain."

"And his nephews, Dr Rusi Engineer and Farhad Engineer."

"Mrs Manek Bai Dhondy's brother is called Mr Keki Lal Kaka."

"Ha ha…haha…hu…huhu…Keki Lal Kaka, huhu … hu …."

"Raghubir Prasad, think more about this secret plan."

Raghubir Prasad sat up again.

"All right, Bela and her party will arrive from the city and sit in the hall downstairs. For the *Inder Sabha* we will also invite some dancing girls. Exactly at seven, Rupa my maid will give Bela a signal who will tell her mother, 'Mummy, may I go and fix my make-up?'" Raghubir Prasad Singh said this in a high-pitched voice. Suddenly he felt self-conscious about the inappropriateness of speaking in such a manner about a girl soon to become the wife of his friend and who therefore deserved respect. This subtlety was lost on Qambar who was sitting next to him listening to the plan. He didn't notice the high-pitched voice.

"Look, there is a bathroom on the ground floor of the house and one on the floor above," Raja Sahib said, explaining the plan of the house with the help of matchsticks which he laid out on a peg table. "The downstairs bathroom will be flooded so Rupa will ask Bela to come upstairs."

There was a knock and Idu came and placed roasted partridges and kababs on the table. Qambar got up and locked the door.

"But this scheme, too, has a hitch," Raghubir Prasad said after some thought.

"It's perfect. You have promised to be neck deep in this with me. What a bogus Rajput you are!"

The Thakur got excited. "Done." He picked up a kabab. Suddenly he exclaimed. "What about Munshi Bhawani Shankar Sokhta who always knows what's going on?"

"He is in Allahabad."

Both refilled their glasses and were lost in their thoughts.

On the third day, the chief reporter, Meraj Ahmad, went to Bela's house with pictures for the photo feature. Qambar had written a brief message behind one of the photographs.

At the appointed time, Bela appeared at the agreed place in Daliganj. She was sitting on her haunches near the cages of an old bird-trapper. The bird-seller was wearing a worn-out khaki coat. This old man, with a drooping white moustache and a long sparse beard, took out two red munias from the cages, and as was the custom circled them over her head as a sacrificial offering and handed them to Bela, who took them and set them free.

This scene, riddled with spiritual angst, moved Qambar Ali. He was sitting in his car, waiting, at a distance. A few minutes later Bela came running and parked herself on the front seat. The road was empty. Sometimes a vegetable vendor would pass by with his cart. A few potter women were sitting silently, their wares of idols and imitation fruits spread out on sheets. Bells were ringing in distant Hanuman temples. Qambar made her memorise details of the plan. She got out of the car and Shaikh Sahib disappeared in a flash into the darkness.

Next day Thakur Raghubir Prasad's chief adviser, Kale Khan, went to the house of Abdur Rahman, the owner of the bakery. "I have learnt that you are returning to Bombay. Raja Sahib wanted you to perform the *Inder Sabha* at his house."

*

In olden times, groups of entertainers would come in their small ox-drawn carts to this double-storeyed garden-house to create gaiety in the wilderness by enacting the *Inder Sabha.*

Raja Sahib's car brought the Bombay artistes from the city. All the arrangements had been made in the hall. The male and female servants were ready. There were watchmen armed with sticks at the gate. As in Teen Katori House, Chameli Begum noticed that here, too, the atmosphere of old aristocratic homes had been maintained. Bageshwari Devi of the Gandharva caste had already arrived with her group from her village. Chameli Begum was very surprised to see the dancing girls. She had spent such a long time in Bombay that she had forgotten about such girls. Other guests had yet to arrive from the city. Inside the hall of the bungalow Bela, made up as Sabz Pari was sparkling and singing.

> *With tenderness now bring him out, my Yusuf, the one I love*
> *From the suffocating dark, my comforter, the one I love.*

Gulab, dressed as Pukhraj Pari was strutting around and Chakotra Garhwali was made up as Kala Dev. Chameli Devi was setting Bela's plastic wings right.

"In an *Inder Sabha* enacted in this very Lucknow, Akhtari Bai's wings were made of real bird feathers dyed in different colours," Master Mogra sighed.

Wearing waistcloths and torn shirts, a barefoot group of dark villagers appeared. There were five of them, and a small child who kept pace with them with his tiny steps.

"Salamalekum, Kale Khan Bhai," the leader of the group called out.

Kale Khan stepped down from the veranda. "Oh ho, Hanif Bhai! Walekum asalam. Come, come."

"We heard that the *Inder Sabha* was being performed at Raja Sahib's, so we too came along." The five of them sat on the floor in the portico.

Meraj Ahmad, chief reporter of *Red Rose*, arrived on his motorcycle.

"Hasn't Qambar Miyan come," Chameli Begum peeped out of the house and asked.

"He has gone for a press conference to Delhi. He will return on Sunday. Don't wait for Raja Sahib. He is going to be late. You should start singing for the guests." Kale Khan requested the bhaat-bards to begin.

They stubbed out their bidis and stuck them behind their ears. The child sat in the circle like a baby monkey. The five men were his father, paternal and maternal uncles. He would grow up listening to the epic of Alha and Udal and then earn a living by reciting it. In the same way as Ustad Mogra had learnt his art from his father and uncles.

Hanif, the leader, drew in a breath and began fluently.

To the Deccan went Shah Madar
They went east to Ayodhya
The city of Lord Ram's avtar.

Meraj Ahmad said to Bahar Phulpuri, "It is good I came. We are doing a feature on folk artistes."

Across the Jamuna Alha sits,
Listen, brother to my words:
Ali, Ali the Sayyid cries, as he runs in Ali's name
Chests beaten with swords. Heads fly into fields
Sayyid orders Alha saying: Listen, my son to my words
To solve the problem they have come
From Malhina to the battlefield of Mahoba.

Their voices reached the hall. Chameli Begum and Bela came to the door.

"Amma, what are they saying?"

"What would you understand, you Bombay girl! Go and sit inside." Chameli Begum was slightly worried. Why hadn't the guests arrived as yet? But then this wasn't Bombay where people were punctual. The atmosphere here was that of a village. It seemed they would be spending all night listening to Alha.

Prithvi with his army of three lakhs, camped across the river,
Prithvi was beaten and chased, his mule-like horses captured
Alha now said to Sayyid, Chacha listen to what I say.

Meraj Miyan leaned towards Bahar Sahib and said, "Bahar Sahib, you are a very educated man. Who is this Sayyid whom Alha is calling his chacha and who fought on his side against Prithvi Raj?"

"Arrey, Sahib, all my knowledge is totally jumbled up from writing film songs. I believe he was a warrior Sayyid from Banaras."

"How did a descendent of the Prophet reach Banaras in the twelfth century?"

"He must have been a Sayyid from Kannauj who came with Masud Ghaznavi and settled there. Some of those had settled in Banaras. A miracle worker."

"Bahar Sahib..."

"Bhai, let me hear the Alha. I haven't heard it since I left Phulpur. I'm feeling homesick."

"Yes, but tell me something. The bhaats have been bards for centuries and keepers of folklore and ballads, yet they starve and are unaware what an important role they play."

Outside the portico flocks of cranes were descending on the trees. Words kept falling from Hanif Khan like a fresh waterfall.

Bahar Sahib kept smoking. Then he said, "Why wouldn't they starve after the decline of their patrons, the zamindars?"

"Bahar Sahib, the one and only solution for this country is communism."

Bela had stepped out into the veranda and was listening to this conversation with interest.

"Come, sit here," Kale Khan immediately got up from his chair.
"Meraj Sahib, are you a communist? And Qambar Sahib, too?"
The Green Fairy talking of communism was a strange sight.
"We are not card-holders—although...?"
"But you do believe in communism?"
"Absolutely. Qambar has decided that he will donate his house

along with its grounds to the Party. The papers will be signed any day now."

Bela was shocked. "To the Party...?"

"Yes. Qambar Miyan and we and have formed a new party—the Red Rose Party. He will contest elections as a candidate of this Party."

Inside, Bageshwari Devi began to sing,

Beloved, the night has arrived
So wave the hand fan
The season for waving the fan has arrived.

Bela looked at her watch. A quarter past seven. She went back into the hall.

Rupa, the maid, came in. To her, she said, "Bathroom."

"Come..."

"Amma, I'll just be back. I have to fix my make-up, too." She picked up her bag and followed the maid but returned almost immediately, holding her skirt above her ankles and displeasure on her face. "What a nuisance, Amma! The bathroom is flooded, and the children of the dancing girls are splashing around in it."

Rupa, the maid, said, "Come upstairs."

*

When she reached the second floor, she took off the plastic feathers. The maid took her to a room where Qambar Ali, a maulvi sahib, two witnesses and Kale Khan were waiting. Thakur Raghubir Singh was guarding the door, a pistol in his hand. There was grave silence in the room. "Kale Khan here is going to be your representative," Qambar Miyan said to her.

She kept quiet. "What are the conditions Qambar Bhaiyya?" Kale Khan asked.

"What's the need for conditions? This is a deal made willingly and out of love, and I am a poor man."

"How much is the mehr?"

"That which is according to the Shariah. I have no wealth or possessions. What I have I am going to bequeath to the people."

"Qambar Sahib, I want to talk to you, come into that room."

He got up from his chair. Kale Khan got up too.

"Not you, Khan Sahib. Come Qambarji."

Surprised, Qambar went into another room with her. She sat down on a stool.

"You will have to settle Red Rose on me as my mehr."

"What...?"

"Yes. Your wife and children have more right to it than the people. I have heard enough of your rubbish, revolution and whatnot. All bloody nonsense. You don't believe in private property, right? Nor am I ready to be discarded from your house at a moment's notice like my nani Jafar Bandi, and mother, Allah Jilai Bai alias Chameli."

"But I...." Qambar Ali's mouth had fallen open in amazement. He began to stutter. "Wh...when did I ask y...you to marry me? It was you who told m...me."

Used to walking on dark, hilly roads, Chakotra Garhwali walked silently up the stairs.

He peeped into the veranda and then quietly crouched next to the window. He was dressed as Kala Dev, the black monster, had rubbed lamp soot on his face and was wearing black. In the dark, Raja Raghubir did not see him.

"You have given me your word."

"Wo...word. What...?"

"The day you were telling me about the plan you said that you would accept all my conditions. Did you say that or not?"

"I never thought of this! I could never imagine that y...you would ask su...such—"

"I want to save your ancestral property for your descendants and see to it that you in your foolishness don't give it to the Red Rose Party. What is this Red Rose and where did this Lal Gulab come from? Come on, let's go and get married."

Surprised, Chakotra Garhawali moved towards the staircase

where he saw Raja Sahib standing guard. He turned back and looked around. Then, like a mountain otter, Chakotra got up, leapt onto the drainpipe, slid down and returned to the portico. He was aghast. These were matters concerning rich people, that too involving a woman! He thought it best to keep quiet for the moment. You'll get yourself into a mess, Bachchu, he told himself.

He dusted his hands and went and sat on a reed stool. Took out a flute from his pocket and started to play the raga Madhu Madhavi gently.

*

Immediately after the nikah, Shaikh and Begum Qambar Ali went down the rear staircase of the garden-house.

Thakur Raghubir Prasad Singh was already there, alert with a pistol in his hand.

Raghubir Prasad Singh stretched out his hand and opened the door of the car. The veiled beauty got into the car. Qambar Ali and his adventure-loving fellow scout smiled and signalled success by greeting each other with a boy scout salute with their fingers. Qambar Ali started the car and disappeared into the dark moonless night. As he headed towards the Shahjahanpur-Bareilly highway to take the road to Kathgodam, he smiled and said, "The drop-scene of *Inder Sabha* as performed by the Moonshine Theatrical Company of Kathgodam."

*

The plan had been so secretive that no reservations were made in Nainital. When they reached there, they discovered that no rooms were available in the better hotels. They were thus forced to head towards the hotel belonging to the Raja Sahib of Teen Katori.

The manager, Babu Kali Charan Rastogi, had seen him since he was a child. In the last days of Barrister Ali and his Begum, on the suggestion of the Rani Sahib, he had told Munshi Sokhta that if a wedding between Safia Bitiya and Qambar Miyan could be arranged to take place along with Bobby Miyan's, then he would get rooms

done up for them too at this hotel. Now he saw the young man standing there with a young woman covered in a burqa. It is true that after the death of their wealthy fathers, sons often go astray, but it was utterly shameless of him to turn up at the Teen Katori hotel with some loose woman hidden under a burqa. The old manager did not present the register to him. When Qambar Ali himself, with shaking hands, wrote Mr and Mrs in it, the old man was even more enraged and mortified. Till now he had never seen such coarse behaviour in this resort meant for wealthy and respectable people.

"Sahibzade Miyan, I never expected this from you," he said sharply.

Qambar paled.

"At present all three daughters, Jenny, Penny and Fenny, are staying here. The husband of the middle daughter is also here from Pakistan. In the morning Raja and Rani Sahib are expected."

It had started raining heavily.

"Come and sit in our sitting room. Leave for Ranikhet as soon as it is light. I'll call Romanov Hotel for you."

"Arrey, not them," Qambar Miyan panicked even more.

Haji Rahimuddin was even worse-tempered than this manager. He was a friend of Miyanjan who used to handle his legal problems for him. He owned a chain of western style hotels in Lucknow. His great-grandfather, Haji Rahimuddin, had come from Bukhara and therefore, during British times, had given his Ranikhet hotel a Russian name which sounded very romantic. Before independence this hotel had been extremely popular with the British.

"Not the Romanov. We will stay somewhere else."

"Why don't you tell him?" Bela asked from behind the veil.

"So that everyone finds out, and Gulab comes and stabs us?"

"Arrey, you are such a coward!"

"All right, but for God's sake will you keep quiet. All three cups are here right now. Oh God, what a mess we're in! It's raining so heavily and it is so dark, and the hilly roads are so dangerous and slippery. Who knows, the car might just slip and fall into a ditch and Bela Rani is slain even before we reach Ranikhet."

"God forbid! Why don't you wait till the morning?"

"Oh, yes, and wait for Safia Sultan to come down in the morning. What an awful mess."

He rented a cottage when he reached Ranikhet and went out to look for servants. Bela took charge of the kitchen. It started to rain again which confined them to the cottage. He got tired of listening to Bela Rani singing. He even began to dislike his favourite 'Dark clouds gather'. He was an influential journalist and therefore, even though he was in the hills, he arranged that news of a sensational marriage was kept out of the press. When it stopped raining, Bela Rani stepped out to shop and bought a heap of expensive clothes, because when she had reached Raja Sahib's bungalow, all she had with her was her make-up kit.

*

The hills were covered with clouds. One afternoon, while sitting and drinking tea in the lounge of the cottage, Qambar Miyan suddenly asked, "Except for Rabil Kumar, I have met the entire cast of your *Gulzar e Muhabbat*. His name was listed in the advertisement for Sanobar Film Company. Is he some hero?"

"Bahar Sahib had already thought of the name, but we were still looking for a hero," she said saucily. "Now we've found him."

"All right. Who is he?"

"The one sitting in front of me."

Shaikh Qambar Ali, editor *Red Rose*, laughed out of politeness.

3
Madhumalti

Al Hamdu, sitting on her string bed said, "When he was leaving he said he was going to Delhi, but he ended up in Ranikhet. Munshiji, before he left for his village, told me that there was a letter from Bhaiyya from the hills." In the summer, whenever Bhaiyya went anywhere all the servants spread out their cots and slept in front of the portico to guard the house. Before they fell asleep, they would talk. Ramzani's wife would prepare betel leaves, Idu and Bhagwan Din would sing kajris and Ramzani would tell them tales from *Dastan i Landhur*.

"O, Ramzani Bhaiyya, I see the moon of the third month. You must remove the spell," Al Hamdu spoke again.

Whenever she had seen the new moon of the third month, the entire month had been troubled. So, now when she saw that moon, she would begin a search for Ramzani. He would fill a silver cup with water and put a quarter of a rupee and green leaves in it. Al Hamdu would cover her head and sit respectfully. Ramzani would sit on his haunches and begin recounting the story of the prince and the son of the minister who were out hunting in the jungle when they saw a spouted jug from which a shining being was struggling to get out through the spout. The being told them that it was the second-night moon of the third month and it was in great pain.

Even the late Begum Sahib, may God grant her a place in paradise, whenever she saw the moon of the third month, would immediately call Ramzani and make him tell her this very story. After that she would dip her fingertips into the silver cup and Ramzani would sprinkle water on her toenails. She would then

smile and say, 'Don't tell Bhaiyya about this—he will laugh because I give speeches against superstition on the radio.'

"Aye, there it is, I see the wretch again," Al Hamdu muttered.

"Khala, the moon of the third month isn't that large, nor does it stay for so long. I think it's the moon of the fourth-night," Idu said.

Al Hamdu was reminded of the late Begum Sahib and she became tearful. "Do the dead see the moon and the stars?" she asked sadly.

"What do you mean? They live among the moon and the stars themselves. It is not as if they stay buried in the ground. They've gone from there a long time ago," Idu said confidently.

"Aye, beta Idu, on dark nights like this when the garden smells so amazing one wonders if Sahib and Begum Sahib are here, like a sandal plant. Like this madhumalti—is it a creeper or a girl?"

"It's the cucumber vine which is a girl," Ramzani said earnestly.

"Once Munshiji told us about the tree-girl, both a tree and a girl," Bhagwan Din said.

"The madhumalti flowers change colour from white into pink. It's like women—two faced," Idu decided.

"Oh yes, as if men are very innocent and pure," Zaitun piped in.

Suddenly, the portico was lit by a bright light. A jeep drove in and stopped. Raja Raghubir Prasad Singh got off. All of them stood up and saluted him. The Thakur took out a sealed envelope from his pocket. "Is Munshiji here?"

"He has gone to the village. He will come back tomorrow."

"All right, then, Al Hamdu Khala, keep this envelope safely and give it to Munshiji when he returns. I have to go to Calcutta now and don't know when I will be back. Bhaiyya may need this paper if he has to get it registered in court."

"All right, Huzoor."

He got into the jeep and drove towards the gate. Al Hamdu took the envelope, pulled out a key from the seam of the drawstring of her gharara and went to the servants' quarters. In her room, she pulled her trunk out from under her bed. In his hurry, Qambar

Ali had forgotten to take the marriage contract with him. Thakur Sahib had put it into an envelope and put his seal on it. Al Hamdu moved aside some clothes and placed it in between the folds. She locked the trunk again, took out her prayer mat and said her night prayers on the chabutra. When she came and lay down on her bed, she saw that Ramzani, Idu and Alauddin were already snoring in their cots in the same way that the deer and blue bull were sleeping in the cattle pen.

Aye, there you go. I forgot about the third-month moon-spell. Anyway, God is our protector. She turned on her side and fell asleep in the cool breeze.

*

One evening, a week later, a dust-covered car arrived in the portico. There was luggage on the car and inside it. He had gone with just one attaché case, how come he had returned with so much more? Al Hamdu stepped forward to take a look. On the front seat sat a memsahib dressed in western clothes—a scarf on her head, wearing dark glasses and a pantsuit. Both of them stepped out. "Salaam, Al Hamdu Khala, is everything all right?" Qambar Ali sounded a bit nervous. But then, he was always nervous.

Idu came running and opened the dicky. The lady took off her scarf and dark glasses and climbed the stairs, patting her hair into place with her finger tips. All the other household servants came running, too. The entire staff of the three magazines would also have been there if it hadn't been a Sunday.

Phatku and Bhagwan Din unloaded the car. Everyone gathered on the veranda.

Bela had seen English movies in which a young, handsome lord, having married the poor governess, brought her to his country house and the entire staff would stand in a line to welcome them. The butler, housekeeper, housemaid, cook, kitchen maid, etc., all dressed in their starched black-and-white uniforms would courtesy. These humble and poor servants in their dark-hued clothes meant to disguise dirt, stood silently, shocked. Here was the girl from

the nautanki who came wearing strange clothes to get herself photographed. Ramzani said under his breath—"what a bizarre sight! Bhaiyya has lost his mind."

Qambar tried to speak sternly. "Idu, carry Begum Sahib's luggage to my bedroom. And Amdu Khala, take these baskets of fruits."

"Wait a minute, let me count them first," Bela said stepping forward.

"Bahu Sahib. Bhaiyya's gardens are full of mangoes, guavas and all other kinds of fruit, we have all seen enough," Al Hamdu said sharply.

"O-kay, o-kay, never mind."

At a distance, on the garden road, a rickshaw came to a halt. Munshi Sokhta dismounted and took off his luggage. He was returning from the village and had come from the bus depot. He bent down and took out money for the fare from the pocket of his waistcoat and then turned around and looked. He moved forward and saw Bela. He too was amazed.

"Adabarz, Bhawani Chacha," Qambar Ali wished him in an embarrassed tone of voice.

"May you live long."

"Where is the bathroom?" Bela asked Zaitun. She immediately remembered the time she had asked Rupa the maid the same question and felt a strange misgiving. Why did all this happen? What if it hadn't happened? It's good that it did. It's splendid. It would have been awful if it hadn't. Have I let myself be overawed by these two-bit servants, she asked herself as she briskly followed Zaitun into the house.

Freshened up, she emerged from the bathroom and Al Hamdu called out from the gallery, "Bahu Sahib, I have laid out the tea in the drawing room. Please come there."

Now, that's it. Bahu Sahib, drawing room, please come there—the way you speak to aristocrats. She went into the drawing room and sat down properly on the same sofa that she used to sit on when she came for her photo sessions.

Munshi Sokhta was passing by in the veranda. Qambar Ali called out to him, "Bhawani Chacha."

He came into the room with heavy steps.

"Namaste, Sokhtaji," Bela said in filmi style.

"Bless you, Bahu Sahib." He kept standing and then said, "Excuse me while I put my things away in the turret. They are still lying outside," and he left.

Two weeks passed. The servants went about their work silently. More than their silence, it was Qambar's indifference that was killing her. He would go to his office at nine in the morning and start work on his magazines. He would even eat lunch with his staff and worked till it was dark. After that, he would go and sit in the drawing room where drinking sessions with writers and journalists would begin. At night he would say, "Bela, what can I do? I have turned the magazines from fortnightlies into weeklies and the work has increased considerably."

Bela felt that this coldness towards her was more insulting than the humiliation that her mother and grandmother faced when they were made to sit near the footwear. Once, Amma had sat on the bed of one of the Begums and the Begum had immediately snubbed her, "She has started putting on airs. Now she wants to come and sit next to me."

The employees of Red Rose are indifferent to me for the same reason, she thought.

One day she brought up this matter with her husband. He said, "You have a complex about yourself. If they were friendly towards you, you would complain that they don't treat you as a Begum Sahib."

"No, this is a strange situation. Except for Sokhta, all of them belong to the lower classes, but if another person from their class rises in social standing, they resent it. They love their enslavement. They always want their lord to be their master. You are unnecessarily killing yourself trying to establish a classless society."

"Bela, these servants represent my parent's feudal times. Their children who work in factories won't have their slavish mindset.

It is out of loyalty that they are unhappy because they wanted me to marry an heiress. The socio-economic reasons for this need to be analysed. Apart from this, the truth is—they don't have a go... good opinion of people involved in nautanki and films, in general, and have many misgivings about them. And also because you are... you are..."

"Don't try and offer excuses for them."

"Bhawani Chacha is like a father to me. If my father were alive, he would have behaved exactly in the same manner. And Ammijaniya's attitude would have been the same as Amdu Khala's who has brought me up. Why don't you do something since you are so bored? Learn to type. We can't employ a new typist since our expenses are mounting, and we get few advertisements. I'm drawing upon my capital to meet the costs. If you learn to type, we can ask you to type some of the articles. Will that be all right?"

Bela was delighted. After office hours she would sit at the desk of Miss Chote Lal and practice typing.

Two months passed in this way.

She was an expert in the management of the kitchen. She had cooked food in the kholi ever since she was a child and helped her mother with her eatery under the banyan tree. She did not like the food prepared by Ramzani, preferred coconut in all her curries.

Ramzani complained to Munshi Sokhta. "When the late master went on his hunts, I cooked daal for him on a banana leaf in the jungles. That is not a joke. I'm from a family of royal cooks. Bahu Sahib, however, considers me incompetent."

The kitchen was situated far from the house, adjoining the servants' quarters. The food was cooked on a large stove using coke. In the house, there was a side room lying vacant which Bela converted into a modern kitchen—white tiles, a white sink, white cabinets, frilled white lace curtains in the windows, vases and still life pictures of flowers on the walls. She scoured pictures of kitchens in *Homes and Gardens* while she was decorating her kitchen. She got a gas burner installed and read recipes from British women's magazines and made tasty European dishes for her husband's breakfast.

At breakfast one day he smiled and said, "You've turned out to be an excellent housewife."

Bela beamed and became tearful, "Thank God, there is something about me that you like."

"Come on, if I hadn't liked you, why would I have married you in such a dramatic manner," he said, wiping his mouth with a starched napkin and rushed to his office

*

Munshi Bhawani Shankar Sokhta was standing on the outside veranda receiving the post from the postman. Bela passed by but did not greet him. She called out to Alauddin the driver, sat in the car and went shopping, again. The peon brought the mountain of post and placed it on the table of the secretary, Miss Elizabeth Chote Lal, who used to ride to work on her bicycle from Lal Bagh. She sorted the mail into different piles and presented the letters addressed to Sahib to him. Munshiji came in and sat down on the table with the telephone. To save money, Munshi Sokhta also worked as the telephone operator. And depending on which magazine the call was for, he used to answer with *Red Rose*, good morning, *Gul e Surkh*, adabarz or *Lal Gulab*, namaskar.

Apart from being the telephone operator, he was the legal advisor for Red Rose Publications and in charge of the literary section of *Gul e Surkh*. To please Bhaiyya, he had even started writing progressive ghazals which sometimes graced the pages of *Gul e Surkh*. Talking to the editorial staff of *Lal Gulab* he had been heard saying, "It is the duty of us socialist writers..."

He did all this to please Qambar Ali because he loved him as he would love a son, and he felt that after his marriage, Bhaiyya seemed preoccupied and sad. The news of his marriage had still not become public. His close friends praised him for his courage. The family at Teen Katori House was aghast, and Bhawani Shankar had kept his opinions secret. He felt that there had been no need for such theatrics. Bhaiyya could have openly married Bela, there would have been no harm in that. He was a young man who, though he led a

comfortable life, carried the sorrows of the world and therefore needed a little excitement.

While going through his mail, Qambar Ali suddenly called out to him.

Bhaiyya looked more worried than usual. He said, "Bhawani Chacha, come with me," and took him into the drawing room. In his hand, he had a letter sent by Master I.B. Mogra, Nagpada, Bombay.

Bhawani Shankar Sokhta, having been a clerk to the late Barrister Azhar Ali for forty years, had dealt with many cases of fraud. He was sure Imam Bakhsh Mogra had secretly scripted the drama that had played out at Raja Raghubir Prasad's house in Chinhat. He had seen that Qambar Ali was an emotional, simple and naïve man of means with no elder relatives to guide him, for he considered Sokhta nothing more than an ordinary clerk. He had made his daughter pretend that she wanted to escape from the bonds of her family.

Sokhta's suspicions were confirmed when Qambar Ali murmured as he sat down on the sofa, "Uncle Bhawani, m...my magazines are running at a loss. Where do I...find three hundred rupees a month for this."

Bhawani Shankar placed his wire-rimmed spectacles on the tip of his nose.

Ustad Mogra had written: "A rich man like you has cheated poor people like us. Our Sanobar Film Company crashed even before it took off. The three of us will be on the streets soon. I know aristocrats like you. You are enamoured of Gul e Abbas at the moment, but you could lose interest in her equally fast and then you will cast her aside, and she will have no place to go. She has lost her chance of becoming a major film star. Bahar Sahib has a family. How long will he support us financially? Please fix a life pension of three hundred rupees for us. My wife and I will bless you."

Munshiji took off his spectacles and was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Bhaiyya, whatever you have done has been done. Now I won't stay quiet anymore. Life-long pension for what? He used to say that he is a jack of all trades and that he had even earned

from palmistry and fortune-telling. In Bombay, a person can find all sorts of work and can feed himself. Was he living in high luxury till now? And that trickster hero-son of his, the tabla player, can't he earn and feed them? And since you have brought the matter up, tell me what part of the mehr did you promise immediately and how much did you defer? Who represented the bride? Who was the maulvi who was there and who were the witnesses?"

"Kale Khan, Raghubir Prasad's driver re...represented the bride. The maulvi was from Raghubir Prasad's village, and the witnesses were the employees of Raghubir Prasad. I'm not sure, but I think their names were Ikram Ahmad and Ashfaq Ali."

"And the mehr?"

"Me...mehr. Uncle Bhawani do you consider me a child? The whole of India is afraid of my pen."

Munshiji smiled.

"All right, if not the whole, at least half of it. All the ministers first read my editorials. Even Panditji...."

"The mehr. How much was to be paid immediately and how much was deferred?"

"I decided that after a lot of deliberation. After all, I'm the son of a barrister."

"The settlement?"

"Just this house. Only the ho...house. Not the orchards."

Sokhta was dumbstruck. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. There was a deathly silence for some time. For a moment Qambar Miyan was afraid that Munshi Sokhta would pick up a stick and start thrashing him with it. He gathered all his courage, squared his shoulders and sat up straight. He tried to whistle softly. To show how unconcerned he was, he began shaking his legs.

"You have the key to Begum Sahib's locker. Her jewellery?"

"Oh ho, is Ammi's jewellery in the locker? I had forgotten about that, and I'm glad you have reminded me. I can sell that and make up for the losses that the magazines are incurring. And don't tell Bela about it or she will get after me saying that I should give the jewellery, too. I have no idea why women are so passionate about

jewellery. Bhawani Chacha, what else is there in the locker? Share certificates?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you told me. I can sell the shares when I need to. Now I feel a bit relaxed. All right, will you get a money order form."

"Why?"

"Shall I let Mogra and Chameli starve? Bhawani Chacha, they are the parents of my legally wedded wife, and I have no complaints against her."

"Bhaiyya, this entire farce that Bela Rani wanted to escape from her parents and needed your help was concocted by Master Mogra. And you are so naïve that you got taken in by it. Think about it carefully and calmly. And then they made you gift the house to them. Neither you nor Raja Raghubir Prasad thought up this plan of the secret wedding enacted at Chinhat. In reality, it was scripted by Master Mogra, perhaps with the help of Bahar Phulpuri alias Dev Tar Barabankavi. Think about it. Think very carefully."

Qambar Ali thought about it and then shook his head. "Bhawani Chacha, that may or may not be true. You are a man of law, and in law there is such a thing as Benefit of Doubt. Won't you grant them that?"

Miss Birdie Chote Lal peeped into the room and said, "Sir, a call for you."

He got up. "Come on, fix two hundred rupees a month on Masterji. If you look at it, I have been unfair to them. I ruined the ready-to-go plans of their Sanobar Film Company. You have no sympathy for the poor Ustad. You are now a progressive journalist. Think how our feudal society has treated artistes like footwear for centuries. They have always been exploited. In our personal lives, if we do not live up to our ideals, then our Marxism can be damned. Yes, Comrade Chote Lal, I'm coming."

*

The call was from the office of the Election Commission. The next day at dawn, wrapped in his dressing gown, Qambar Ali strolled

up to the peepal tree where Sokhta was worshipping and doing the surya namaskar. He stubbed out his cigarette, threw it far away and stood to one side. Sokhta finished his prayers and looked up. "Namaskar, Swamiji," Qambar said cheerfully.

"God bless you, Bhaiyya."

"Ah ha ha—it's about God that I have come to bother you with at this time. First, tell me, which God do you believe in? Which ones?"

"I believe in the one Divine Being—the Supreme Being. The manifestation of whose majesty is Shivji, Shankar Bhagwan. His beauty is manifested in Vishnu whose incarnations are Ram and Krishna. And all these gods and goddesses are manifestations of his various attributes, his agents, and his additional splendour. How come you concern yourself so early in the morning with the faith and beliefs of the Hindus?"

"I asked because I wondered which god or goddess you prayed to here."

"I worship Shankar Bhagwan as the symbol of the grandeur of divinity." As he was an old-world kayasth he spoke very ponderous Urdu.

"I just wanted to know. Actually, I'm going to run for elections and want you to swear by Lord Vishnu that you won't tell Bela where the money for this election will come from."

"And where is it going to come from?"

"Just take it that Goddess Lakshmi will be sending it."

"For God's sake, don't do anything childish again."

"Childish! Just watch out, I will be a member of the ministry one day."

*

Without telling Munshi Bhawani Shankar, Qambar Ali sold the shares his father had bought for a fraction of their worth. It was a straight contest against the ruling party. Lakhs of rupees were needed. Next, he sold off his mother's jewellery. There was lots of commotion at the house—workers, jeeps, mountains of posters,

buntings. Tea was served all day to the workers and the food was cooked in large cauldrons. Even his personal employees, wearing badges of the Red Rose Party, roamed around feeling self-important.

In this hustle and bustle the very existence of Bela was forgotten. She lay in her bedroom, sulking and reading Marie Corelli novels which her only friend, Elizabeth Chote Lal, would bring for her.

Qambar Ali lost the election. After this financial disaster and political defeat, he turned to liquor with a vengeance to drown his sorrows.

Bela's shopping continued as always. She would get into a rickshaw and go to Hazratganj, Aminabad, Nazirabad and Chowk. She would return in the evening laden with parcels. Now she spent most of her time in Mothercraft shops.

One afternoon, Qambar was sitting in his office going through the half-yearly accounts. Munshiji, his spectacles resting on the tip of his nose, sat facing him. He asked, "Bhawani Chacha, you have not entered the money that came in from this year's sale of mango and guava crops."

"You were busy in the elections. Bahu Sahib herself collected the money directly from the khatik who bought the produce. She had to get some new furniture made."

"And you didn't even tell me! Did she too swear you to silence?"

"You were touring the village for the general elections. How could I have informed you?"

A rickshaw came in and stopped. Bela climbed the stairs of the veranda. Qambar got a glimpse of her through the door, and he immediately gathered some papers and got up.

The office was right in front of the drawing room, with a gallery separating them. Qambar reached it at the same time as Bela. He said, "Come this way for a moment," and took her into the drawing room.

Bela placed a packet containing wool and knitting needles on a side table and sat down on the sofa. She thought to herself, there is going to be another row today.

He started to speak. "Bela...."

"Talk..."

"Birds talk, people speak."

"All right, please speak."

"Look at these. Bills come in one after the other from every shop. You also took the money from the orchards and blew it up. You didn't even tell me."

"You sold your mummy's jewellery and your daddy's shares for your pleasure, did you not?"

"For pleasure! It was for a cause, and who told you about that? Munshiji?"

"He is even more secretive than you. He doesn't even speak to me."

"Then? That Birdie Kale Lal?"

"Birdie Chote Lal."

"You spy on me. And this bloody Birdie, I made her swear on the Bible."

"She said nothing to me. But she does type all your correspondence with the bank. And as per your orders, I sit at her desk after five each day and practice typing. That day Birdie had forgotten to remove the carbon copy, and that's how I found out."

"And why have you had this furniture made?"

"For Baby, who is going to arrive in March."

"Who is this gentleman, Baby? And where is he coming from? My God! How often have I told you, Bela, not to carry on with your vulgar baby-daddy-mummy-uncle-aunty talk."

"All right, I won't. I have already learnt to say abdar khana instead of the pantry, clear the table instead of remove the food, hammam instead of bathroom and using the commode instead of going to the latrine. The affectations of your speech are just too much. The day..."

"That day..."

"Even your servants correct me."

"Not servants, domestic help."

"That day I only said, get Kalawati to sweep and wash the ghusal khana, and Al Hamdu created an uproar. 'Aye, bahu,' she said, 'we

call the place where the Shias bathe their dead a ghusal khana.'"

"Your parents went from Lucknow to Bombay, but your speech—goodness—we have strayed from our original subject. This bill...."

"What do you want? What you tell—sorry—whatever you say, I do."

"All I am saying is that you should be careful with your spending."

"Why don't you reduce your spending—so much liquor—so much alcohol! I have had such beautiful furniture made for the nursery. You will be delighted when you see it—it's white with Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs painted on it. The room that is your ladies' guest room, inshallah it will become the nursery."

"You will bankrupt me of whatever little is left."

"Which doctor told you to bring out a magazine? It is beyond you. You had studied law and like your daddy...."

"Miyanjan."

"Like your Miyanjan you should have practised law. You would have inherited his established goodwill. Some people in a fit of insanity want to enter the film industry and some into politics. I don't see any difference between you and my father and Bahar Phulpuri."

Bela could sometimes force Qambar into silence.

"Now, if you earn nothing from your magazines, close them. Build a market on the orchard lands."

"Market! And become a capitalist? I am converting the orchards into a trust. I will build a reading room, dispensary and a free night school for the public."

"Build a lunatic asylum, too, so that you can be locked up in it."

"Enough, you go inside and order tea."

"How many votes did the public that you are killing yourself for, give you? It has rejected your Party's programme. They want their temples, mosques and gurudwaras, nothing else. Like your Ramzani, and Idu and Alauddin and Bhagwan Din and Phatku, they are not ready to change society. They want their masters to

stay their masters. You can destroy yourself for them, but they will never listen to you."

"Because they don't have the right leadership! We have to educate the people."

"You can carry on as you wish but I will not allow you to turn the orchard lands into a trust. Bequeath them to me right now."

"So this reasonable, learned, judicious speech was leading to this! To try and get me to gift them to you. I was stupid to give the kothi to you. It was a delicate situation then. In fear of your knife-wielding scoundrel of a brother, Raghubir Prasad had to arm himself with a pistol to see that there was no violence. It was out of fear that I..."

"Now, in the same way, you are going to bequeath the orchards to me."

"Don't bully me. Go inside."

"No, I want you to decide right now. Otherwise, where will Baby play?"

"There is such a large garden for your child to play in, while crores of hungry, naked children play in the dust."

"I would only buy that if you were to go and live in a slum with them."

"When the time comes, I am ready to do that."

"You will never do that. You want a comfortable home and good foreign liquor. Call the lawyer immediately and get the papers ready. Otherwise the baby and I will end up on the street."

"Street! What street?"

Outside, a cart carrying the nursery furniture arrived. "Get the stuff unloaded," the cart-man called out.

The office was closed. Kalavati was sweeping the outside veranda. She went to the servants' quarters and informed everybody, "A Mahabharat has again broken out between Sahib and Begum Sahib. Now she is insisting that he gift the orchards to her."

"Bhaiyya has got such a tyrant of a wife. He was always delicate. Now he has turned completely pale. Allah, forgive my sins," Zaitun said, placing her hands on her ears.

The war was still waging in the drawing room.

"This poor man is suffering, worrying about the ordinary people! Truthfully, no one can be more class conscious than you."

"Me, class conscious?"

"Why haven't you still introduced me to your friends? You've kept me underground when you should have proudly announced, this is my wife Bela, the daughter of Mogra the bhand. Immediately after our marriage, you withdrew the photo-feature about me from the press, telling Meraj to kill the story. Usually, when a man gets married, his friends and his family invite the new couple for a meal. Even your beloved Raghubir Prasad's wife hasn't invited me over. We were married in his house and I haven't yet met him. You haven't even introduced me to the freeloaders who gather here every evening."

"All of them are intellectuals, what would you talk to them about? Qawwalis and cinema?" He immediately regretted what he had just said because it was unfair to an intelligent and perceptive girl like Bela.

"Who are my friends? Only Elizabeth Chote Lal, who is from a humble and poor background like me. And I shouldn't even shop? Should I just be moving grain from one storeroom to another like a trader with nothing to do? All day I rearrange furniture. But then I have always liked keeping a good home. I grew roses in a tin canister in the kholi. I used to sew curtains out of old saris and put them up. Now that Allah has given me a house like this...."

"Excellent! I am all praise for your good taste. But don't buy useless new things. All these things are Ammijaniya's old things. They are sacred to me. Miyanjan and Ammijaniya bought this stuff from England at a time when no one ever visited England. These days every bhangi and chamar is travelling abroad. You can never really appreciate this classy furniture and these ornaments."

"Classy! You're right. No one is more class conscious..."

"There you go again. Class conscious?"

"And a snob about your family background, your education in Mussourie, your talent and your fame—all this baggage for just one

poor you! And the burden is crushing you. And then there is the weighty crown of humility you wear—I'm a dervish, I'm uneducated you say. You are not in the least self-conscious about publishing letters in praise of yourself in your magazine."

"One has to do all that in politics."

"You are not only class-conscious but also caste conscious, otherwise why would you be calling Birdie Comrade to her face, and behind her back refer to her scornfully as Kale Lal? And what you say about bhangis and chamars going to England. Were only your upper-class parents entitled to go to England?"

Rattled, Qambar kept quiet. This lady had turned out to be more argumentative than Sharbari Devi.

"I know why you make these frequent trips to Delhi. You land up at the Russian embassy or the embassies of other East European countries every evening and soak up their liquor. And these big-gun revolutionary poets of yours when they travel, stay with millionaires instead of the homes of their poorer fans. I have some idea of this swindling world from going to mushairas with Bahar Sahib. Don't think I'm a fool."

"You, a fool? God forbid!"

Every few days they began quarrelling over the orchards. Qambar would keep quiet, and Bela became free with her hands. After being beaten by Gulab and Chameli, she would go around beating up kids in the chawl. Irked by Qambar's silence, she now started hitting him. Qambar would drink a glass of cold water, keep quiet and tell himself that he should treat this situation as a scientific experience. Bela was a slum child and had grown up in the violent atmosphere of the slums, he would reason. Qambar's silence would enrage Bela further for she took his patience as a sign of his class snobbery and his patronising attitude, and would curse him even more.

That morning at breakfast the matter came up again. "You're calling the lawyer today, aren't you?"

"There were three things on your agenda. 1) Marry that idiot

Qambar. 2) Take possession of his house. And 3) The same with the orchard. Sadly, the third is going to be impossible."

"I'll take a jump in the well in the orchard."

"I will jump," Qambar corrected her.

"I'm warning you."

"Let me make a paan for you for tomorrow/Let me make memories for you for tomorrow, from the masnavi *Zehr e Ishq*."

"Gift the land to me, or I will jump into the well. And if I survive I will tell the police that you pushed me in."

"We'll see about that. Just leave me alone."

Enraged, she got up from the table, took the teapot and flung it at him but it missed. He got up and ran outside and she followed, pushing and hitting him. He jumped into the car, started it, and disappeared.

Some khatiks were present near the madhumalti creeper. So was a vegetable vendor from across the river who carried the news of the fight to Teen Katori House.

It was the same night, around two-thirty, when there was the sound of something heavy falling into the well. On the enclosed chabutra, Al Hamdu was rolling up her prayer mat after her midnight prayers. She ran at once and woke up Ramzani, Alauddin, Idu and Natthu, and they all rushed to the well. The same thought flashed in all their minds—let it be her and not Bhaiyya. Bhagwan Din and Phatku peeped into the well, and they lost their voices.

Phatku had never seen the famous painting of Ophelia floating in the water with flowers and leaves entangled in her hair.

"Begum Sahib, catch hold of the rope...the rope.... Keep holding it tight...don't worry.... Oh, Ali help us," Ramzani said, as he got ready to lower himself into the well.

Munshiji, as was his practice, was sitting on the floor in the office, waste paper spread out in front of him, checking each paper to ensure that nothing of any use was given away to the kabariwala. He couldn't concentrate on this because he was worried about Bhaiyya whose problems just did not seem to be ending. To divine

Bhaiyya's fortune, he took down the collected works of Hafiz from the cupboard. He had just settled down, cross-legged, on the bed under the bulb without a lampshade when Al Hamdu, who was beside herself, entered.

After the fight in the morning, Qambar Ali had left to report on the Assembly session. As usual he returned late at night, collapsed on his bed and fell asleep. He woke up when he heard Al Hamdu's terrified screams. "Munshiji, send for the lady doctor, call Kamla Gupta."

In the next few days, Bela was very unwell and wept incessantly. When she dozed, she muttered, "Old Mama.... Hanna Bai...what had you said to me—go jump into the well...it will be either bad luck or good luck. I had bad luck. Damn bad luck."

Qambar made sure that no one got to hear of this painful incident. From Alauddin down to Phatku all the servants were devoted to him. "Bhaiyya, once you've told us, not a word is going to leave the house," they promised.

"Excellent, Ramzani, I wouldn't expect less from you." He found himself speaking like a feudal lord and was irritated with himself. Conditions, developments and the situation had conspired against him and trapped him in a web, the way the deer was entrapped in its enclosure.

The doors into the inner house were now kept bolted. In any case, no one ever came to meet Begum Sahib. Now Birdie Chote Lal, too, didn't have permission to go inside.

Bela recovered in a few days. Qambar called a lawyer and willed the orchards to her. Bela leapt up from her pillow to see him sign. Seeing the pen move she knew that he was writing a Q. He wrote Q in a specific way as if the moustache of a Chinese man had drooped very low. He would write the rest of the letters very artistically. The A of Ali looked like the Eiffel Tower. She smiled to herself—what a good, simple and true husband he was—a harmless man, though he could be stubborn. It is said that it was his mother's pampering which made him obstinate, but he eventually does what I say. Qambar Ali gave her the papers. When she began to move around,

she put the papers in a packet, went to the post office and sent them off to her father in Bombay.

For a change of scene, Qambar Ali took her to Ranikhet.

Before she left, all she said to Al Hamdu was that she had gone out at night for some fresh air and happened to stroll up to the well. Standing on its edge, she had happened to look in, and then her foot had slipped on the moss and she had fallen in.

Al Hamdu nodded silently. People weren't worried about the police getting involved over a slip of the foot. Bhaiyya had constantly been telling Munshiji that he was afraid of the matter becoming a police case. A police case! What trouble my poor baby is in!

Silence fell on the kothi after Sahib and Begum Sahib left for the hills. The staff of the magazine arrived at half-past nine in the morning and left at five. Munshi Sokhta would meditate and worship under the peepal tree as usual. Alauddin, Ramzani, Idu and Natthu would pray in the mosque and then hang around because they had nothing to do. All of them were concerned about Sahib. Al Hamdu, after her dawn prayers, would carry her prayer beads and sit under the peepal tree and talk to Munshi Sokhta. They were all still in shock from the happenings of that night.

Tuesday fell three or four days after Bhaiyya and his Begum had left for Ranikhet. Carrying offerings and with tilak marks on their foreheads, Bhagwan Din, his wife Ganga Dai and his nephew Phatku, returned from the temple next to the bridge and sat under the peepal.

"Salutations, Al Hamdu Khala," Bhagwan Din said.

Al Hamdu acknowledged them with a sound through her nose as she continued turning her beads.

A few minutes later, when she had finished her prayers, Bhagwan Din said, "Amdu Khala, listen, I have said this to no one till now. Bhaiyya is in great trouble. Three days before this terrible incident, very early in the morning while I was preparing the cattle-feed, Begum Sahib came over. She said to my wife, malin, I believe you used to make a string of mogra flowers for Mummy every morning and that you made henna paste for her every Friday. My wife said yes. Begum Sahib asked her why she didn't string flowers

and make henna paste for her, too. My wife said that she would do it if Begum Sahib asked for it. Then she asked me, mali, how deep is this well? I told her that bhang used to grow here, and we used it on Holi. The senior Begum Sahib was afraid that we might jump into the well while high, so she had a lot of mud dumped into it.

"Bahu Sahib then asked if a person would drown if he fell into it. I said, Oh, no Begum Sahib. He may thrash around a bit, but if he caught the rope hanging in the well, we would bring him up immediately. Why would he drown?"

Everyone kept quiet.

"Amdu Khala," Bhagwan Din continued. "Bhaiyya is facing a terrible situation. I have arranged for Hanuman Chalisa to be recited for him at the temple."

The three of them got up, left the temple-offerings in the leaf-cup on the platform under the peepal for Sokhta, and went towards the mud house.

Al Hamdu kissed the prayer beads and touched her eyes with them, wrapped them around her wrist and then began strolling on the garden path restlessly. She broke off a leaf from the lemon tree and smelt it, then moved on. She looked at the guava tree and then plucked a leaf from it, too. Came back and sat down on a stone. Sokhta kept sitting cross-legged in front of the idol of Mahadevji. She began thoughtfully, "Munshiji, look at Allah's greatness. Flowers, leaves, trees, animals and birds have stayed the same for millions of years. The lemons still smell and taste the same. The mangoes, the jamun, the karonda, corn—whichever fruit or vegetable you eat, it's still the same. It's only humans that have gone to rot."

Munshiji nodded in agreement.

"The joints of this world don't function properly anymore, isn't it so Munshiji?"

"Yes, Amdu Baji. Life is a warning. Through good and bad words and deeds man moulds his life into something meaningful, and sometimes makes it meaningless."

"When can he ever mould life completely? Munshiji, near my house in Imam Ganj, there is a graveyard. Every Thursday I would go

to the graves of my parents and husband to light incense and think of all the things they said they wanted to do and could never do or say. Once I saw an empty clay pot lying there and thought to myself that I would cook something in it. I did. The water evaporated and people ate the food. I washed it and put it away. My father hoped that he would sell his ekka and buy a tonga instead. He ended up in his grave still hoping. My husband died when he was twenty-five and Munshiji, I was widowed when I was eighteen. I worked hard to bring up my sons and got them married. Munshiji, there was a guava tree in my courtyard. It's still the same. But my sons are humans and have changed. My daughters-in-law fought with me and turned me out of the house."

"Baji, what is the point of recalling all that, what has happened has happened."

"I reached here and served Begum Sahib for so many years. Now look at this Memsahib's deceitfulness. If she had drowned that night, God forgive us, Bhaiyya would have been at the police station."

"Allah was very merciful, Amdu Baji."

"What prayers have I not said and which supplications have I not made for Bhaiyya's welfare? Allah even listens to the prayers of a disabled ant. I had a strange dream last night. There was a bright light in the garden. The three, Mogra, Chameli and Gulab, emerged from the roots of the banyan tree and sat looking for something. Earthworms got stuck to their hands, and no matter how much they flung their hands about, they couldn't get rid of them. Then their hands disappeared, and there were roots of the banyan in their place. And then Munshiji, the three turned into real mogra, chameli and gulab flowers. It seemed I was standing there and watching all of this happen. I kept wondering whether they were Mogra, Chameli and Gulab earlier, or were they jasmine and roses now? I was totally confused, Munshiji."

"Yes, it's a disturbing dream, Amdu Baji."

"Then there was a cold breeze and jackals started howling." A few moments later she changed the topic. "What is that story about jackals howling on a bitingly cold night? Nawab Asafud Daulah

asked what the jackals wanted. His minister said they were feeling cold, so Asafud Daulah sent them seven hundred shawls."

A gust of cold breeze blew.

Al Hamdu wrapped her double-thread cotton shawl tightly around her. "The weather is changing, Munshiji. And look, the weather every year is the same—winter, summer, monsoon. It's never warm in winter or cold during the monsoons."

"Amdu Baji, let a couple of more atom bombs explode, that too will happen. Bhaiyya was telling me that it is now warm in Mussourie."

A smart, black capped, black-bibbed wagtail was walking on the grass, wagging its tail. Al Hamdu looked at it and said, "Look, Munshiji, the wagtail has come down from the mountains. Winter is here."

Stooped, she walked towards the kitchen.

*

Winter months were very pleasant at Red Rose—the mist swimming over the doob grass, thick fog above the trees, frozen drew drops on the flowers. Along with the new sun rays Bhagwan Din would appear, wearing a cap covering his ears and carrying a watering can as he moved towards the flower-beds. The buffaloes would belch in their hold. The chirping of birds would drown the sounds made by the servants. Even in winter, Sokhta would go to the river for his bath, and after doing the surya namaskar would sit down under the peepal to pray. After that he would return to his turret and Idu would bring him his tea. With the cup in his hand, he would go out to feed the deer and the blue bull.

Earlier, the day would begin with the arrival of clients. Now the activities of *Red Rose*, *Gul e Surkh* and *Lal Gulab* would start the day. There was not the slightest change in Bhaiyya's routine on his return from Ranikhet. He would come to his office after breakfast. Munshi Sokhta, Miss Chote Lal, Meraj Ahmad and all the sub-editors, proofreaders, calligraphers and artists would arrive punctually and get busy with their work. At eleven sharp, Idu would

come with a large pot of tea and with him would be Al Hamdu, carrying a tray, and she would place cups of tea on all the desks. Despite his failures and personal problems, Bhaiyya would talk to everyone pleasantly. Pleasant chatter, humour, jokes and banter would continue between the teams of *Gul e Surkh* and *Lal Gulab*. In the plywood-covered verandas the editors of the two magazines sat across from each other. "Sahib, how does one translate this word," one would ask in Hindi. The editor of *Gul e Surkh* would answer, "Just write, we are struggling."

"Great. What a matchless answer that is," the editor of *Lal Gulab* said.

"Matchless means unsuitable or disjointed. For God's sake don't take it to mean unparalleled."

The editor of the Hindi magazine would say, "Sahib, our idioms are different."

From his table, the editor-in-chief would intervene, "Share and feast."

Inside, Bela's day would begin with boredom and depression. The furniture for the nursery was lying on the back veranda. She would look at it and weep and then would sit down to read recipes in women's magazines. She would lie in her bed or start rearranging one of the rooms.

That particular Sunday was a cloudy day. Qambar got ready soon after he had had his bed tea. A Russian delegation was arriving from Delhi, and he went to the airport to receive them. Bela got up at her usual time and faced the prospect of another long day. After breakfast, she sat down to think what she would do. She called out to Al Hamdu who appeared. "Call the bearer," she ordered.

Idu was dusting, and he appeared with the duster thrown across his shoulder. Bela took out her large bunch of keys. In films based on Bengali stories, she had seen how housewives had a bunch of keys tied to the corner of the loose end of their saris. Bela didn't wear saris in the Bengali style but enjoyed the pleasurable experience of possession as she walked with measured steps, like a Sarat Chandra Bose heroine, jangling her keys.

At both ends of the outside veranda were two large turret-like rooms. Sokhta had been living in one for years. Every fortnight, on a Friday or Saturday, he boarded a bus which took two hours to get him to his village where, in his ancestral mud home, lived his wife, two widowed sisters-in-law and a widowed sister along with her children. Munshiji had no male progeny. He had three daughters and was now free of the responsibilities of their marriages. He would punctually return to the kothi on a Sunday evening, and he always brought some present from the village with him—jaggery, green gram, water chestnuts. He would stay up late, reading in his room.

In the second turret, the late Bitto Baji had locked up all the extra things from the house as well as those which were used only occasionally, like the large white sheets which were spread over carpets, bolsters, and quilts and mattresses for guests.

The male guest room, along with a bathroom, was at the end of the third veranda. The ladies' guest room was inside.

Bela unlocked the turret. She went in and examined its contents. She called Idu and Al Hamdu and made them start lifting things. "Where do you want us to put these?" Idu asked her.

"In the room next to my room which all of you refer to as the ladies' guest room and next to which I have had the new kitchen made. I was going to convert it into a nursery," she said holding back her tears. "I am now going to make it into a breakfast room. This room is lying unused, so I will make it the ladies' guest room."

"How will guests stay here, next to the portico? And which bathroom will they use?" Al Hamdu enquired with a finger on her nose.

"Which bathroom does Munshiji use?"

"He uses our bathroom. Do you expect lady-guests to use that bathroom?"

"We'll see. As if there are house guests queuing up to stay here. Since I've been here, not even a mouse has visited."

"Guests would come regularly during Begum Sahib's time—ladies, one better than the other. They even came from abroad."

"Look, Al Hamdu, don't argue with me. Keep quiet and do what I say. Take this salt cellar, scrub it and put it on the dining table."

"It is not a salt cellar, it's a silver ink pot," Al Hamdu said, covering her face with the end of her dupatta as she sniggered.

"All right. And these beautiful vases are just lying here."

"These are spittoons, Bahu Sahib."

Bela bristled. She turned to Idu. "Why are you staring at me? Carry these quilts and mattress and put them in the room attached to mine. Go on."

The room between the master bedroom and the ladies' guest room was the late Bitto Baji's dressing room. Al Hamdu followed them there. "Bahu Sahib, this is Begum Sahib's dressing room. Please don't make it into a godown."

"Do what I say. Do you hear me?"

Al Hamdu answered her back in the same tone. "First, learn how to live in homes like this, then start giving orders."

Bela was stunned into silence by this insolence. Then she stamped her foot and screamed. "Get out now, at once. Come and settle your accounts on the first of the month."

Al Hamdu put her hand on her waist and said coldly, "All right, I will leave."

"Go blacken your face. Get out!"

Silently, Al Hamdu and Idu brought in the bolsters, quilts and mattresses from outside and put them in the dressing room. After finishing the job, Al Hamdu dusted her hands, raised three fingers to her forehead and said, "All right, salaam, Bahu Sahib. May you grow old, still married."

"Get out!"

Idu kept standing, as if in a swoon. Al Hamdu walked towards the servants' quarters raining tears. When she reached her small room, she started packing her stuff. All the other servants and their children gathered to commiserate with her.

Bela appeared in the back veranda and called out to Idu. "Bearer!" She always addressed Idu as the bearer. "Search the ayah's luggage."

Everyone kept quiet. Idu too didn't move.

"Come and take a look for yourself," Al Hamdu taunted her.

"Arrey, Amdu Baji, she will babble and it will be over, why are you leaving? She still runs after Sahib to hit him. Do you think her word counts?" Bhagwan Din tried to console her gently.

Bela came across. Al Hamdu dragged both her trunks out onto the veranda of the quarters. She took out each piece of clothing and shook it. These were old ghararas, dupattas, qameezes, sweaters, shawls given to her by the late Begum Sahib.

"She who now resides in heaven gave all these to me. I've stolen nothing. And there are these silver bangles, earrings and these two golden bracelets which Begum Sahib had given me when Bhaiyya graduated from the University."

"All right." Bela went back, slightly ashamed of herself.

Al Hamdu had spread out all her stuff on the floor. She had forgotten to lift the newspaper that lined her bigger trunk under which was hidden the sealed envelope with the marriage certificate. So many disturbing events had taken place in such quick succession after the wedding that she had forgotten to give it to either Munshiji or Bhaiyya. Even when she was leaving, she did not think of it.

"Where will you go now?" Ramzani asked her.

"I'll go to Imam Ganj, where else?"

"Don't do something so drastic, Amdu Khala. Let Bhaiyya return."

"No, Phatku. I'm heartbroken. She searched my stuff! How can I stay here anymore?"

"All right, at least wait for Munshiji to return."

"After she has told me to get out, do you think I will stay on and get insulted any further in my old age? Go, Bhaiyya Phatku, get me a rickshaw for the bus station. Go, my son...."

"Wait, Amdu Baji, I am coming with you. Bhaiyya must know your address. He will surely call you back. Let me accompany you to the bus station," Ramzani said, wiping his tears with the palm of his hand.

That day, early in the morning, Munshi Sokhta had gone to Balaganj for a darshan of Baba Neem Chameli. Two cycle rickshaws carrying Ramzani, Al Hamdu and her luggage left from one gate of Red Rose. Fifteen-twenty minutes later, Munshi Sokhta entered through the other entrance.

4
Kadambari

DISTURBED after her dealings with the servants, Bela returned to her room. She remembered that she hadn't practised her typing for some time, so she went into the office, sat down at Birdie Chhote Lal's desk and took the cover off the Remington. She put in a sheet of paper but stayed distracted. Al Hamdu was her mother-in-law's faithful maid, and Qambar was very fond of her. She had been impulsive in firing her on the spot. But then if I'm not afraid of such a famous husband, why should I put up with the rudeness and taunts of a two-bit servant who happens to be his favourite, she told herself.

She started to type and soon heard sounds from the veranda. The walrus-moustached old man, Munshi Kofta is back, she thought. He might ask for an explanation regarding Al Hamdu, and who knows how angry Qambar would be when he came back. Maybe he would accept even this.

Sokhta lifted the bamboo curtain. She glimpsed a woman behind him. Bela was afraid that he had run into Al Hamdu and brought her back.

Munshiji cleared his throat and said, "A lady wants to meet Bhaiyya."

Oh ho, Bela heaved a sigh of relief. All three magazines were beginning to do better. Of late Qambar had allotted a page in each of the magazines for readers' complaints. People had begun to come in with drafts of their grievances, and among these many were burqa-covered women.

"Send her in."

Munshiji went outside. Hesitantly, a woman wearing a burqa

entered and sat down on the chair facing the typist. She seemed tired. Lifted her veil. She was wearing spectacles with thick lenses and an ordinary sari, white plastic bangles, pink rubber slippers—a true representative of the common people. Qambar was devoted to people like her. Bela smiled out of formality and extended her hand to receive her complaint.

The new arrival took Bela to be a Christian typist because the Panchgani-educated, Bombay-bred Mrs Ali was usually dressed in slacks and a jersey at home. The lady looked around, then in a tiny voice and a hostile tone said, "It's Sunday today. Do you work on Sundays, too? Don't you go to Church?

"No. Work on the magazine continues even on Sundays," Bela too drew out her claws.

Munshi Sokhta lifted the curtain again and brought in a suitcase and a lota into the room. He went out and came back with a bedding roll. He placed this dust-covered luggage close to the visitor's chair. Bela looked at Munshiji questioningly and smiled.

After the incident with Al Hamdu, she had to stay on the right side of Sokhta.

He said nothing and went out again.

"I am from Zafarpur. I've come straight from the railway station."

Bela had heard of Zafarpur. It was where Qambar's maternal grandparents had lived. Her mother-in-law was buried in Zafarpur. She said, "Zafarpur! That's very far."

"Yes, it's close to the Himalayas. It's a full night's journey away."

"Then you must be very tired."

"Pardon?"

"You should introduce yourself."

"I'm the daughter of Qambar Sahib's mother's sister.

"Hello." Bela was not aware that Qambar had a khala. He had said that all his maternal relatives had gone to Pakistan.

"His real khala?"

"Well, you can consider her real. Actually, more than real."

Bela rang a bell. A sulking Idu appeared.

All the servants were extremely upset about the way Al Hamdu had been insulted and dismissed and felt hostile towards memsahib. From sheer habit, she asked him to send Al Hamdu. Immediately she remembered that that ill-tempered woman wasn't around anymore. So she said, "Bring tea." To the visitor, she said, "You couldn't have had any breakfast. Come inside. Sahib will be back in the evening. He has gone to receive some Russians and will spend the day with them. I cannot say when he will be back. You can't tell with journalists."

Bela began typing again. Chandni Begum got the feeling that this Christian secretary was in control of Qambar Ali's household.

Idu left the tea tray on the big table.

This Christian girl had made her proximity to Qambar Ali apparent, so to put her in her place Chandni Begum started the conversation again.

"It's a pity that Bitto Khala...."

"Bitto Khala?" Bela lifted her head and repeated without thinking. She poured some tea.

"Qambar Miyan's mother."

"Oh yes, of course. Since when have you not met Sahib?"

"I've never met him. Qambar Miyan came to Zafarpur once with Bitto Khala while he was studying in Mussoorie. He came to meet Amma, but I was in school," Chandni Begum answered. She had to tell the truth.

"What do you do in Zafarpur?"

"I used to teach in a college. I resigned three days ago."

Far away the church bells were tolling tunefully. A bird came and sat in the window. It was just like the robin redbreasts on Christmas cards. Bela looked at it with interest.

The bird flew away.

"My Baji Amma flew away like that bird, suddenly."

Bela was startled by Chandni Begum's voice.

"Baji Amma had behaved very strangely. She was chopping vegetables with a rusty knife. She cut her hand, and I kept telling her to get an anti-tetanus injection. She paid no attention, just

bandaged her hand and continued with her chores. The poison spread through her body. It's only been two months. I had informed Qambar Miyan about it. I'm sure he did not receive the letter, or he would have written a letter of condolence. Now there is no one else in the world except him whom I can depend upon." Her hands began to tremble, and she put down the teacup.

Alarmed, Bela got up. She went up to Chandni Begum and tried to console her. "Arrey, you seem miserable."

"More than miserable." Chandni Begum took off her spectacles and wiped her tears with the corner of her burqa. Bela noticed that she was attractive but how the thick lenses ruined her looks.

"Relax, no one will come in here."

Chandni Begum took off her burqa.

Bells in the church continued to toll.

"And your Daddy—where is he?"

"He went to Pakistan. From there he wrote and divorced Baji Amma."

"Aren't there any other blood ones? I mean relatives?"

"There are, but they are all selfish and vile. The good ones are all dead. My paternal grandfather...," Chandni Begum laughed bitterly. "My ancestor was a commander of seven thousand horsemen. My great-grandfather was the governor of a province. My grandfather who had the title of Khan Bahadur was a deputy collector. My maternal grandfather was a wealthy landlord. Would they have lived a hundred years for my sake? They died when their time came. The ones who lived abandoned me. Once Abba left, they all ignored us, worried that they would have to support Baji Amma and me. Baji Amma did her BT on her own and educated me till I got an MA, B.Ed. There was only Bitto Baji who wasn't even related to us by blood. She was from the same town and had studied with Amma at Aligarh School. Whenever Bitto Baji came to Zafarpur, she would always enquire about Amma."

Bela was confounded.

"Once or twice Bitto Khala even tried to help us financially, but my Baji Amma was so proud that she did not accept a single paisa.

If Bitto Baji brought a new sari or some other clothes for her, she would take them only after lots of persuasion. Three years ago, Bitto Khala came to Zafarpur and she...and she..."

Bela was now listening to her very attentively.

"And she talked to Amma about something."

"What thing?" Bela asked with alarm.

"Why should I keep things from you? Even though I have stopped trusting people, you seem like a good sort of a girl. But then you are Qambar Miyan's secretary so you must be aware of his affairs. He might have already mentioned this to you."

"He has told me nothing."

"Bitto Khala had practically settled matters about us."

Bela's throat turned dry.

"Bitto Baji returned and wrote to Amma that Qambar Miyan had seen my photograph and liked me. And that he would be coming to Zafarpur soon."

"And then?"

"Then what? First, his Miyanjan died. Then Bitto Khala, and then my Baji Amma. Parents have the bad habit of dying the moment they find the opportunity. Their children can scream all they want; it doesn't matter. After Amma's death, how could I live alone? A crumbling house, no servants or help. The principal and her husband who owned the girl's college at which Amma and I taught, said how will you live alone, stay with us, so I went to their place. The old man was my father's friend and a father of grown-up children. I had stayed with them for three weeks when his intentions towards me turned evil."

"Arrey, you don't say..."

"Whenever his wife wasn't around he started saying double-meaning things. I was shocked. I considered telling his wife, but that would have created even more trouble. One night when everyone was asleep I heard a noise and woke up and saw the old gentleman standing in the door to my room. Alarmed, I switched on the light. Embarrassed, he retreated. His wife had perhaps got up to go to the bathroom and she saw her honourable husband fleeing from my

room. She already had her suspicions, and a storm broke. The old man said that I was a wayward girl who had been telling him that I was helpless, and since the principal was an old hag, he should marry me.

"When the wife heard this, she picked up a hockey stick and ran to hit me. I too created a ruckus, and the whole household woke up. As soon as it was morning, I wrote out my resignation and handed it to the wife. I couldn't think of what to do except to get on a train and come to Qambar Miyan in the hope that he might remember Bitto Khala's promise."

Bela was staring at Chandni wide-eyed.

"Do you feel sorry after hearing about this incident?"

"Sorry, very sorry."

Idu came into the room. "Begum Sahib, it's going on for eleven. Give me money for the provisions."

It seemed as if lightning had struck Chandni Begum.

Bela left for the kitchen where she found out that Ramzani had gone to see Al Hamdu off to the bus station. She ordered Zaitun to get the lunch ready and returned. Chandni Begum was sitting frozen like a statue and was looking at the mistress of the house, terrified.

"I am sorry," Bela murmured.

Chandni Begum kept quiet.

"Qambar has never mentioned you to me, and I know nothing about this. He is such a forgetful man that I am sure that he has forgotten all about the conversation his mummy had with your mother because he is a very principled, straightforward, truthful and simple man. If he had remembered this—oh, he is so forgetful that sometimes he calls me Sharbari instead of Bela. I have found out that Sharbari was a Bengali classmate of his. Well, what can be done now? You've just been through a very sooty journey so you should have a bath. I've had the water heated for you. Then you should rest in our ladies' guest room. I'll get it ready for you. Lunch will be at one."

"What lunch and what dinner? I don't want to stay here for a moment longer. I'm dying of embarrassment. After what I have

told you, how I can stay in this house? You might be very kind, but I don't want to face you or your husband. And when has he ever even seen this cursed face of mine?"

"Oh, don't say that, you're very good-looking. You should wear contact lenses."

"Take me somewhere else. I'll stay there and find a job for myself. You must know a lot of people here."

"I don't know anyone here."

"However, there is one thing I don't understand. Why didn't I find out about the marriage of Shaikh Qambar Ali, the editor of *Red Rose*? Zafarpur is situated in the back of beyond, on the fringes of the Himalayas. No one goes there. But this news must have appeared in the newspapers?"

"It hadn't been a year since his mother's death, so there were no celebrations. We were married very quietly and simply." Bela was laughing to herself as she said this.

"Please, can you take me somewhere else," Chandni repeated.

"Where can I take you? I'm a stranger here myself. My husband is so busy that we have no social life. Oh yes, there is Teen Katori House. I'm so glad I thought of it."

"Even the little cup…"

"Do you know about that?"

"The late Bitto Khala told Baji Amma about it."

"The little cup has opened a school in her home. You can get a job there. It's a big house so you can stay there, too."

"Come, take me there, right now. Before Qambar Miyan comes back."

"Have something to eat at least."

"It isn't my fate to eat or drink in this house." Chandni bent down and picked up the lota. Bela too thought it best that this unexpected trouble should disappear before Qambar returned. She ordered Idu to get a cycle rickshaw. Bela had thought she would demand a car on the first anniversary of her wedding as a present although her husband would yet again talk about being short of money. But after giving him a drubbing, she would get him to buy

her a Fiat. However, since the incident with the well, she no longer had the courage to bully him.

*

Clothes were being stitched in Rani Sulat Zamani's bedroom. Her middle daughter Parveen Sultan, alias Penny, had come home from Karachi and had bought countless saris to take back with her. She was sitting on a divan concentrating on measuring the sleeve of a blouse. The younger one, Safia Sultan, alias Fenny, was trying to match coloured falls to the saris. The eldest, Zarina Sultan, alias Jenny, sat on another divan trimming the lower portion of a gharara. Ilaichi Khanum sat cross-legged on the floor rolling delicate lace into a ball. Rani Sahib was half-reclining on her bedstead supervising their activities. Onto this peaceful atmosphere, Begum Qambar burst in like a bombshell. An unknown woman covered in a burqa followed her.

This was the first time Begum Ali had come to Teen Katori House after her marriage. The last time she was here was when she, accompanied by tabla and a sarangi, had sung ghazals outside on the chabutra. Today, by the grace of God, Bela marched in and sat on the French couch. The vegetable seller had told the people at Teen Katori House what a prize fighter she was, even thrashing up her husband. "Allah honours whoever he wishes to and dishonours anyone he chooses."

Bela was now the daughter-in-law of a family which matched the status of the Teen Katori family, and the wife of a prominent and well-known man. She had begun to consider herself a real begum because she, in any case, lived in near confinement.

The burqa-covered woman stood there timidly. Parveen, alias Penny's eyes fell on her rubber slippers. She pointed to the low stool implying that she sit there.

The woman kept standing where she was.

The older daughter, Zarina Sultan said, "Oh ho, Bela Rani Shokh. How are you? You seem to have forgotten the way to this house after your marriage."

"Did you ever invite me?" Then Bela turned towards Chandni and affectionately said, "Why don't you sit down?"

"Yes, yes, sit down. Take that stool," Zarina Sultan said.

The long journey and the shattering news of Qambar's marriage when she reached her longed-for destination, had drained Chandni. She collapsed on the stool and rested her back against the leg of the divan. With disgust, Bela looked at these insensitive sisters, who for countless years had been humiliating unfortunate women. 'Wife' and 'maid' were different classes. If she were to go and join Chandni on the stool, the ladies would think that the domni has realised her place.

Unwillingly, Bela kept sitting on the sofa.

"Who is she?" Safia asked.

"I've had to come here because of her. If there is a vacancy in your school, give her the job. She has an MA, B.Ed. She used to teach in a college."

"We've had to close the school. We discovered that a school with the same name, St. John's Convent, has been running for years in Nakkhas. Now we will have to change the name."

"Find the name of some other Roman Catholic saint," Bela said sarcastically.

Safia Sultan missed the sarcasm. "All the Roman Catholic saints have been appropriated by private schools. Now I've decided to call it St. Sofia Convent."

"St. Sofia Convent, God be praised!" Bela couldn't help herself. She began to laugh. First, the brawl with Al Hamdu, immediately followed by the unexpected arrival of Chandni Begum and the tension that it created. Her nerves were giving way.

"We don't need any more staff. Nor do we need an ayah. Our maids are enough for that. And then...."

"She is very needy." Bela pleaded. Need and helplessness breaks a person's pride in an instant. Chandni had to get a job here. On no account can she come back to Red Rose, Bela told herself.

Parveen Sultan from Karachi softened a bit.

"Do you know how to sew?"

Chandni lifted her head. "Yes, I have a diploma in needlecraft."

"We have heaps of things to be stitched and tailors take too long. There is only a month left on my visa, and there are still sixty blouses to be made."

"Sixty? Give her room to stay, and she will stitch a hundred, isn't it, Monie?"

"Monie! What sort of a name is that?" Rani Sahib spoke for the first time. "Where are you from? Aye, Bela Rani Shokh, do you know her well? We will need some proof of identity and address for her. Was she in your father's company too? Though she doesn't look the sort."

Bela ignored the great contempt that the Rani's last sentence heaped on her family because of her need.

"Do you have your MA degree with you?" Parveen Sultan asked Chandni Begum.

"No. I had to resign under conditions in which the principal appropriated all my documents."

"What conditions were those? Don't get us into any trouble. You, Bela Rani Shokh, do you stand surety for her? How long have you known her?"

"She arrived this morning. But her situation is such that she needs to find a job immediately."

"Oh my, again the situation! What is the truth?" Rani Sahib was annoyed now.

Bela now had to tell the truth. "She is the daughter of a friend of my husband's mother."

"Aye hai, so she is Chandni Begum! The one the late Bitto Baji, may she rest in peace, talked about in her last days. How her son was enamoured with some Bengali girl and how, to counter that, thankfully she had found a quiet, helpless girl whom her son had agreed to marry. God is mighty! It was you who was fated to be his wife."

Bela stood up immediately. "Now you need no surety. She will do all your stitching for you. Then you can employ her in your school. I too will continue to look for a job for her. Okay, Monie, bye-bye."

As soon as Bela left, Safia got up and took out a large, gold album from a carved cupboard. "Come here, Chandni Begum."

Still sitting on the stool, she stretched her neck. "Look at these pictures of my Bobby Bhai's wedding. My Dulhan Bhabhi has gone home these days. Look at this photograph. Here is Bela Rani. Her esteemed mother is playing the harmonium and her honourable father and brother are sitting behind her. They are a family of mirasis."

Chandni stared at the flash-lit photograph, wide-eyed.

"This Bela is a low-caste wretch. A horror!" Rani Sahib said quietly to Zarina. "She has dumped her nuisance on to us." Loudly, she said to Chandni. "Listen, Chandni. The truth is that there is no place inside the house. May God be praised, Penny Bitiya and her children are here. Relatives and near and dear ones come regularly to meet them. The house is full of guests, so for the time being stay with Ilaichi Khanum. Their bathroom too is close to where she stays. She too has to sleep outside these days."

Sona Kali entered and announced, "Rani Sahib, lunch is ready." Rani Sahib carefully gathered her gharara and got down from the bedstead. Her daughters put away what they were doing and they moved towards the dining room. Chandni got up from her stool and began to follow. On the day she had left Zafarpur she had bought samosas from a hawker at the railway station and eaten them, and was now famished. She had had a cup of tea at Bela's who had invited her to stay for lunch. But in her arrogance, grief and fury she had refused. Now her pride was about to disappear. Ilaichi Khanum gestured to her and said softly, "Where are you going? Praise God, there are fifteen or sixteen places laid out for meals these days. There is no more place there. Eat with us. There is a tap in the courtyard. Go and wash your face and hands."

"My lota and my luggage..." Chandni said in a feeble voice.

"It must be outside, I'll send for it. Come."

It was an hour before the servants got to eat. Small plates were scattered all over the kitchen floor. The maids and their children dragged narrow planks of wood and sat around the food.

"Come on, Chandaniya, eat," Ilaichi Khanum called out. Chandni was sitting on the ledge around the tap, scrubbing off the soot from the train journey while her tears flowed. Hearing Ilaichi Khanum, she splashed water on her face and walked into the kitchen with her eyes red. She sat down on the plank next to Sona Kali. In a broken voice, she said, "Don't give me any food left on their plates."

"Oh, no, Chandni Begum. You think we eat that? Those are put out for Angoori or the cats."

After eating, she said to Ilaichi Khanum, "I want to rest for a bit."

"Yes, yes, come. These days I too have to sleep here."

In the quadrangle of the palace, one wing was allotted to the maids. Cots were laid out in a row on its veranda. On them mattress made of homespun cotton, quilts of printed cloth and dirty pillows. Khush Qadam, Batashan Bua, Waziran, Nuran, Sona Kali, all slept here. Ilaichi Khanum's bed was at one end. Next to it a string cot was placed for Chandni Begum. "I have put your suitcase in my room. Let me put out your bed," Ilaichi Khanum said. "Push your bed that way, into the sun."

"No, it's fine," Chandni Begum answered and lay down on the bed and closed her eyes.

From the opposite veranda Parveen Sultan called out, "Atu Sahib, please send Chandni here."

Ilaichi Khanum said to her softly, "Go. This is the first day at the job. If you don't work hard today they..."

Chandni Begum was completely exhausted, but she got up and walked to the tap again. To get rid of her drowsiness she washed her face, put on her spectacles and went inside the house.

She sat in an empty room and attached falls to saris till it was dark. Her fingers began to ache as did her eyes. Then she ate in the kitchen. The people in the house went to bed at nine-thirty, and Chandni came to the veranda.

The servant's bathroom was at a great distance in the courtyard. She took a lantern and went to it, came back and lay down on the cot. Khush Qadam lowered the cotton curtains. Chandni cowered

under the quilt. Zafarpur was in the foothills and could be very cold, but there she slept inside a room. This was the first time she was sleeping out on a veranda. The people inside the house were soon asleep with electric heaters in their rooms. In the evening she had asked Khush Qadam why they did not sleep inside. Khush Qadam replied that the small rooms were no longer liveable. "The windows and doors are broken, and the Raja Sahib did not think it necessary to have them repaired because the maids slept outside.They did not feel the cold because of the cotton curtains."

Chandni was cold. She curled up tightly and lay down. The previous night she had shivered in the train. The evening before that she had been in Zafarpur, which she might never see again. What other misfortunes and humiliations awaited her, she wondered. But I'm aware of Allah's mercy, she reminded herself. Oh, kind Allah, how can I thank you enough for immediately providing me with safe shelter and a full stomach. You even got me a hot cup of tea. A million thanks, Allah.

She loved her father who had abandoned her and disappeared, and missed him a lot. He never even thought of writing to her. Every night before she fell asleep she would pray, Oh Allah, keep Abba alive and well wherever he is. Let him come back. Oh Allah, keep Amma alive and well. Oh Allah, let Abba be well. Her mother had been dead for two months yet, out of habit, she prayed, Allah, for the sake of your beloved Prophet, keep Amma alive and well. Give her a long life. She would correct herself immediately and ask him to forgive her mother her sins and to give her a place in heaven. Amen.

Noticing her tossing and turning, Ilaichi Khanum cleared her throat. "Go to sleep now, Chandaniya. You have to get up early."

*

The azure morning peeped in through the fabric of the dirty curtains. Chandni Begum sat up rubbing her eyes and pronounced the kalma. For a moment she was confused. Where am I? In winter, she would see the familiar walls and arches of her home and a view of the garden through her window. Sometimes she would see a

naughty, harmless, spooky-looking hill langoor swinging from a branch. The Himalayan birds would make a huge racket. The wagtail, hill mynahs, silver-eared red-beaked gul sehra, the blue whistling thrush. Dada Miyan would call out affectionately, "Look, Chandni beta, the whistling thrush has arrived to greet you. Come out of your dreams and say your prayers."

Abba would sleep till late in the day. Amma, Dadi and both her aunts would get busy with household chores. The eucalyptus trees in the courtyard would sway in the breeze. On the second floor, in the balcony built in Nepali style with a black pointed roof, Dada Miyan would sit in a comfortable chair in the sun and read the newspaper.

Abba never spoke politely to anyone. When Dada Miyan scolded him, he would talk back rudely. He fought with his wife and his brothers. He would take his gun, get into the jeep and go hunting.

Those were the winters of her childhood. Then, often when she woke up in the morning, some member of the family would be missing—Dada Miyan, Dadi, uncles, aunts, their children. Some left when they died; others left while they were still alive. Abba too disappeared. Like the Imambara hidden in the distant reeds, the kothi too fell into ruin and the garden into decay. Once, during the days of Muharram, a partridge concealed in the bushes called out loudly. Amma was busy studying for her BA exam. She lifted her head and said, "It is said that a partridge calls out in the desert of Karbala. Its calls sound as if it is saying, Hussain has been killed, Hussain has been killed."

At night, the sounds of the Hussaini procession could be heard from far away. Bullock-carts carrying tazias made in Biswan would pass by on the mist-covered roads. Mother would cover her head and make arrangements for prayer and offerings. She would sit down to read descriptions of the martyrdom of Hussain. Even after the death of Dada and Dadi, the departure of Abba and uncles for Pakistan and the ruin of her home, she somehow managed all by herself, to keep the traditions of Muharram as observed by Dadi Amma, alive.

In 1858, the poor queen Hazrat Mahal had escaped to Nepal

travelling through this area. Many members of her defeated army could not go up the mountains and had settled down in these jungles. Their descendants still lived in dilapidated houses and their Imambara survived as a ruin. There was still mourning for Imam Hussain during Muharram. In the silence of the night, the lamentations could be heard clearly. People are resilient; they continue to survive, no matter what.

Amma too was very resilient. She was married after she had finished school in Aligarh. After Abba disappeared, she passed her Intermediate, BA and BT exams. Half her life she lived in distress.

It is good she never got to know of Qambar Miyan's marriage to this conniving mirasin or she would have carried another hard blow with her to her grave.

Earlier when the sweepers, carrying the red cotton flags of Goga Pir, would march on the streets, Ramaniya, after she had finished with her sweeping, would respectfully ask Amma to let her leave because it was their festival. Now she arrogantly informed Amma, with pride and self-confidence, "Begum Sahib, my son has his chemistry exam today and I'm going to the city with him." Amma would say, "Who knows, in ten years her son might be appointed collector of this district. Allah honours whoever he wishes to and dishonours anyone he chooses."

Parveen Sultan's voice assaulted her ears. "Arrey, Sona Kali, is Chandni still sleeping? Tell her to come and begin work."

*

"Jenny, Penny, Fenny, Bobby, mother, father, friends, relatives and countrymen, look at me who..." A loud voice rose from the third veranda of the quadrangle.

The three sisters who had come out into the courtyard to sit in the sun disappeared immediately. A fair young man with a thick dark beard and a wild look in his eyes, wearing a very expensive dressing gown, holding a pipe in one hand and the day's newspaper in the other, walked down the steps of the veranda with measured paces, like Julius Ceasar in a play. His eyes fell on Chandni who was

washing her face at the tap under the guava tree. She had hidden her soap-dish in a branch so that the other servant couldn't use it. She stretched out her hand to get it, but the soap had fallen into the drain. Confused, she bent down to pick it up. When she lifted her head, Julius Caesar was standing next to her.

He waved his hand, picked up the soap-dish and presented it to her with excessive formality and asked, "Who are you, madam?"

Ilaichi Khanum gestured to her from a distance to come away; run, she motioned.

"Who is this Sahib who keeps making speeches? Is he a leader?" She asked Ilaichi Khanum in the evening.

"You can consider him a leader if you want. He is Sarkar's eldest son. He has lost his mind."

Chandni kept waiting to hear the rest of the story.

"Take this rice and clean it."

"Allah, tell me more about him."

Ilaichi Khanum looked around and then whispered. "The worth of Teen Katori was reduced to three cowries. The shock deranged him a bit. His father had sent him to England to study. He brought a Mem back with him." Seeing Parveen on the veranda she said loudly,"Arrey, Chandni beta, how many blouses did you sew today?"

Parveen went inside.

"That English lady, too, was crazy. And looked like a horse."

"Arrey, wah," Chandni giggled.

"Thank God, Chandaniya has finally laughed."

"Then what happened....."

"Vicky Miyan was very handsome. Anyway, the family kept quiet about it. What could they say? Aye, Chandni Begum, do you know how to do the stem stitch?"

Chandni looked into the courtyard. Safia Sultan was climbing the steps.

"She has gone. Then what happened?"

"The Mem used to play tricks and leave the house. Once she went to the club in just her dressing-gown over her blouse and petticoat. Another time, instead of a hat, she put the waste-paper

basket over her head and went for a walk. So, they would not let her out of the house. When she tried to escape, her husband started beating her. She was kept imprisoned in this palace and thrashed for four or five years. One night she escaped with the clappers."

"The hand-clappers? You mean the public?"

"Aye, neither the people nor the public."

"I meant that when a leader gives a speech, the people clap."

"Not them. I meant those who clap first, speak later."

"I don't understand."

Ilaichi Khanum was a very cultured lady. With an effort she said, "Arrey—those—hijras."

"Oh ho!" Chandni Begum hid her face in her dupatta and laughed.

"When the first son was born to the gardener a group of them came into the compound. From her window Memsahib watched them sing and dance with keen interest."

"The next night from a distance, Batashan Bua got a glimpse of a tall, hefty lady, her head covered and the end of her sari pulled down over her face, leaving through the door. Batashan Bua thought it was Sulochna who must have come to receive a gift of money."

"Sulochna—which Sulochna?" Chandni interrupted her.

"The leader of the hijras. These people sometimes take on the name of film actresses. Their old leader used to be called Sulochna. The next morning things became clear. After that Bhaiyya lost it even further. He began to make long speeches. He was about to contest the elections, and it was with much effort that they stopped him."

"Didn't they look for the Mem?"

"For the sake of their honour, the family kept quiet about it. They said that she had returned to England. Sulochna named her 'the fallen star, Safed uz Zamani, Ghalicha Begum'."

"The fallen star, the whiteness of the world, Ghalicha Begum," Chandni repeated. She laughed so much that tears began to flow from her eyes.

"Babu Kali Charan suggested that if Vicky Miyan were married to a proper girl, he would be cured."

"God forgive us, who would give a girl to a mad man?" Chandni said.

"No, he isn't that crazy at all."

*

Winter nights were getting longer. Parveen Sultan's visa was about to run out. Chandni would sew her clothes till the evening and at night she would come to the veranda and liedown on her bed, listening to the goings-on in Teen Katori House from Ilaichi Khanum and Batashan Bua. Or she would talk to them about better days in the homes of her paternal and maternal grandparents.

"My maternal great-grandfather and grandfather were such arrogant, ill-tempered men that no one was allowed to build a brick house in the land they owned. All the peasants lived in mud houses. Such pride and such tyranny! I saw the consequences of that with my own eyes.

"Today, Penny Baji bought a pashmina shawl from a Kashmiri, shawl-seller. It had a jamawar border, two hand-span wide. He charged a lot for it. I said to her, arrey Penny Baji, my Nana, who owned fifty-two villages, had an entire awning made of jamawar. She snubbed me immediately. 'That's enough, stop fibbing,' she said. 'If you ever go to Pakistan and say things like this, the natives there will say that the migrants all tell whoppers. What happened to the jamawar awning, anyway?'

"I felt like weeping and wished I had never mentioned it. I told Parveen Baji that my Mamus were illiterate and debauches and they sold everything—the gate, doors, latches, marble. The two brothers would spread out the awning and sit on their haunches with giant scissors and cut it up to sell it. They fought over every two inches."

"'Did they also go to Pakistan like your Abba?' Penny Baji asked sarcastically. I told her that one had died and the other now drove a taxi in Delhi. Even he has never once asked after us."

After some time Chandni said to Batashan Bua, "Every night I dream of Baji Amma. Last night my Dadi and her maid Sunehra Bua were also in my dream."

"Since you are facing such difficulty, their spirits are restless for you."

"I hurt my mother a great deal, yet she is worried about me even after she has died."

"That is what all children are meant to do—hurt their parents."

"Three years ago, the day Bitto Khala came with her offer of Qambar Miyan, Amma had seriously sprained her leg and was unable to walk. When I returned from college, she dragged herself to the foot of the bed and said, Chandni, there is an offer—

"Batashan Bua, the moment Baji Amma said this, I lost my temper. Whenever some useless offer came for me she would mention it, and I would pull a face and leave the room, but she would go on babbling. She would curse Abba. Why has he left this curse, the bane of my existence, as my responsibility and run away? I would keep quiet and not speak to her for weeks. That day when Bitto Khala left, she came to the edge of the bed. I kept quiet and turned my face away and she too fell silent. Disappointed, she crawled back and leaned against her pillow. Now I cannot forget that scene.

"Sunehra Bua was alive then. She told me that Bitto Begum has spoken to your mother about her son.

"I hurt Baji Amma a lot. Sometimes I would scream that it is you who are at fault or Abba would not have left us. Aye Batashan Bua, I want to go to Karachi somehow and meet Abba. Why has he never bothered to find out how his young daughter is doing? Bua, how do people become so stone-hearted?"

"It's the truth that humans are by nature very wicked, Chandaniya. Otherwise, why was there a need for so many prophets?"

"When Bitto Khala came to Zafarpur for the last time, two days before she died, she sent for Baji Amma and me. Baji Amma was unwell and she was very irritated. Why has she sent for Chandni, she said? Has she brought Qambar with her? Why should we fawn in front of her? I too screamed at Baji Amma. Go, suck up to your wealthy friend some more! But Batashan Bua, look at God's

power! I had to come to Qambar Miyan's door like a beggar and that too for nothing. Perhaps that harlot Bela never told him that I came, otherwise he would at least have rung up and asked how I was doing."

Nuran spoke. "He is a slave to his wife. I phoned Al Hamdu Baji one day. Idu told me that Begum Sahib had dismissed her suddenly. And there wasn't even a whimper from Sahib."

"How can he whimper? She beats him. If he were to say anything he would be thrashed. The world laughs at him too," Sona Kali added, joining the conversation.

The subject of Qambar was very painful. To change it Chandni said, "Atu ji hasn't returned from inside."

Waziran brought in the portable stove from the kitchen.

"She is ironing clothes inside. There is a big party tomorrow because Penny Bitiya is about to return to Pakistan. Now there are going to be dinner parties for her every day," Sona Kali added.

Waziran's daughter, Nuran, sat on her haunches and began to fan the coals vigorously. Chandni was staring at the sparks as they flew.

"Batashan Bua, when I was a child I read a story in English about a young, orphaned, homeless girl. It was the evening of Christmas and, tired from walking, she sat down next to the wall of a wealthy man's house. Christmas was being celebrated inside while outside it was snowing. To warm herself the girl struck a match. In the flashing light, she saw a vision that she was sitting in a warm room, celebrating Christmas. Then the matchstick burnt out. She struck another match and saw herself sitting on an elegant bed—the story went something like that. I don't remember it very well."

Batashan Bua heaved a deep sigh.

Chandni picked up the lantern and went towards the bathroom.

Nuran started muttering. "There is a party tomorrow, so Penny Bitiya is going to make me clean each photograph in the morning. And there are dozens of pictures on each wall. Father, grandfather, this and that."

"So what? Should they put up pictures of your grandfather who

was a water-carrier and who spent his entire life, a red band around his waist, filling water, and was called the bhisti? When he died, he was buried in the graveyard meant for the indigent. Batashan Bua's grandfather was a cook." Waziran's father had spent his life blowing into a fire with a blowpipe.

"And just take a look at her," Waziran continued acidly. "Bad times have befallen her, therefore she is sitting here with the maids. If she were to become a lady again, would she come and sit on a servant's cot? Bela is a domni by caste. When she came here to sing for the wedding, food was served to her outside on a tray. She wasn't allowed to eat with the guests. Now that she has returned as a lady, they grumble."

The next night, because they were all tired from working for the dinner party, they did not gather to talk. Chandni was lying on her bed, eyes closed, trying to fall asleep. She was alerted by Batashan Bua and Ilaichi Khanum's whispers though she kept pretending to be asleep.

"Aye, Batashan, yesterday I was ironing in Rani Sahib's dressing room—take a look, hope she isn't awake…"

"She is fast asleep. Go on."

"Sarkar, Rani Sahib, the three daughters and Bobby Bhaiyya were talking in the big room. Rani Sahib said every doctor suggests we should get Vicky married. That will cure him, they say. This girl is like a godsend—from a good family, educated and good to look at. She is also as fair as barfi."

Chandni couldn't stop herself, and she sat up immediately. "Tell me everything."

Ilaichi Khanum was rattled.

"Bitiya, Sarkar kept quiet. Penny Bitiya and Bobby Bhaiyya were furious. Bobby said that she was only saying that because she was his mother. Vicky can never be okay; I too have asked the doctors. Why do you want to ruin the poor girl's life? Chandni, Rani Sahib is well aware that there is no one to look after your interests. Qambar Miyan hasn't even made a phone call, and Bela will never let you into her house. Where can you go? Memsahib ran away with the

hijras, but what will you do? Vicky will beat you with a cane. He even has a leather whip with which he used to thrash Memsahib. Doctors say that that is his illness.

"I understand why Bobby Miyan opposed his mother so vehemently. It is not that he is in the least bit sympathetic towards you. The real reason is that if his elder brother has any children, he loses out on the property."

Batashan thought for a while, then said, "Beta, there are two sides to every matter. He might be cured. Think of the comfort and ease in which you will live as the older daughter-in-law of the house. But if you are born unlucky, then he will flay you to pieces. And you won't be able to escape from here. Let me tell you one more thing. Don't say anything about this to Bobby Miyan. He pretends to be speaking for you, but he is also your enemy. Let me tell you why. By showing you sympathy he can come on to you. He is not a good man. His wife went home after her wedding and still hasn't returned. When Bela arrived from Bombay he was very interested in her, even though Shaikh Qambar Ali was the idiot who married her. Qambar Miyan knows about Bobby's ways. That is why he has never brought Bela over. That day she came over just to drop you here. Bobby Miyan has the qualities of a hyena. If it were still the olden times at Teen Katori, he would be getting girls abducted from villages."

When she lay down to sleep Chandni said to Allah, Allah Miyan, I am very confused. You show me the way that is best for me.

The next morning, while cleaning the rice, Sona Kali whispered, "Now everyone knows about it. Don't get taken in by what Ilaichi Khanum, Batashan Bua, Nuran and Waziran say. They would never want you to become a lady again. Secondly, Ilaichi Khanum is an upper caste Pathan and has a grown-up granddaughter living with her mother in the village. Once earlier when they discussed that the doctors felt Vicky Miyan might be cured if he was married, Rani Sahib suggested that he be married to Ilaichi Khanum's granddaughter. Bobby Miyan opposed even that. Then you dropped in from nowhere."

Chandni Begum felt faint. Unnerved she went into the sewing room and took off the cover of the sewing machine.

*

"Parveen, when Amma makes a trunk call to Munshi Kali Charan in Nainital to get our rooms ready, it means that they have made a decision," Bobby Miyan said sarcastically, addressing his sister. She was sitting in an easy chair on the veranda hemming the last of her blouses.

"Yes, she wants that the wedding take place before I return to Karachi."

"It's amazing; she still thinks of herself as Queen Victoria. But even Queen Victoria could not act outside the laws of Parliament. Amma is both judge and jury and is turning a helpless girl into a sacrificial goat. Sorry, a sacrificial she-goat."

"The girl is willing, so why are you creating a fuss."

"Is Chandni willing?"

"Why wouldn't she be? Sona Kali, Khush Qadam and others have got a hint of how she feels. She is about to be transferred from the broken veranda into the kothi as the older daughter-in-law."

"Penny, this catastrophe shouldn't be allowed to take place. He can never become healthy again."

"What sort of a brother are you? You're just selfish."

"Selfish? I don't want an army of crazies to be born in this house. Try and talk Amma out of it."

"I have never been able to convince her of anything. Did she ask me how I felt before she married me off? It's another matter that I'm reasonably happy now."

"All of you have been so well educated yet you continue to behave like cows. Doesn't this poor Chandni also have MA, B.Ed degrees?

"I'm noticing that you are turning soft towards this dumb cow."

"Compared to the rude one that mother has imposed on me, why shouldn't I appreciate this gentle-natured girl? You have put her among the servants, and she puts up with this humiliation with such dignity and forbearance."

Zarina and Safia came and sat close to them with their knitting. In family matters, the older one, Zarina was her mother's counsellor and in agreement with her. The second one, Penny, behaved like an 'interfering neighbour' because the neighbouring country was now her home. Safia Sultan had always been silent and indifferent. After Qambar's marriage, she had become very short-tempered.

Flinging his cigarette stub on to the grass, Bobby suddenly said to Parveen, "Why don't you take Chandni to Karachi with you?"

"Why should I take her to Karachi?"

"You were saying you were allowed to take two attendants abroad with you."

"Yes, a cook and an ayah. But Bobby, what the hell do you mean?"

Everyone felt silent.

All three sisters, lost in thought, kept staring at the hibiscus bushes. Silk-cotton blooms were flying around in the clear sunlight. They would float for a while and then, at some distance, disappear into the bright blue expanse.

A soft and delicate, innocent and defenceless girl has arrived here like these flowers floating in the wind. And all these people, for their selfish ends, are drawing up their plans for her. Either she becomes the senior daughter-in-law or an ayah—wah, thought Safia Sultan bitterly. And Bobby! If he could have his way, he would make her his mistress.

Parveen sighed deeply.

"You are so uncaring of your brother?" Safia said.

"What else should one do? We've thought of a cure for him, but Bobby is trying to prevent that," Zarina answered sharply.

"The three witches of Macbeth could learn from the three of you. Leave me alone now," Bobby got up from his chair and went down the stairs into the back garden. Nuran was sitting on a swing talking to the gardener's wife. He called her and said softly, "Look, when the three Bitiyas are taking their siesta, find an opportune moment and get Chandni Begum to come here. I will return." And he went back to his room.

Chandni was performing her ablutions for the afternoon prayers in the inner courtyard. A chiff-chaff came and sat on a branch of the guava tree and began to warble loudly.

Go away, wretch, Chandni grumbled. She laid out her mat on the marble slab that lay under the guava tree.

The moment she finished her prayer, she saw Nuran behind a pillar.

"Baji, Bobby Miyan is calling you. Come quickly."

Chandni had sometimes spoken casually to the roving-eyed Bobby Miyan in passing. He would enthusiastically say 'hello', and even if the maids hadn't told her about him, it was evident that he was debauched, ill-tempered and spiteful; good as neither friend nor foe.

He was standing near the silk-cotton tree holding a file.

"Hello—hello—Chandni Begum—come."

He walked along with her and they went and sat in the grove.

"Don't worry, what sort of a timid girl are you?"

"What is it that you wanted to say?"

"I have to speak to you very briefly. Do you know the details about Vicky?"

"Somewhat."

"This is his medical report. Read it."

She sat down on the edge of the bench and glanced through the papers in the file.

"Schizophrenia."

"I have an MA in psychology. This included a study of abnormal psychologies."

"And still you..."

"Still, what? All of you have made decisions as if I was the daughter of one of your peasants. No one has spoken to me directly about it."

"Everyone is embarrassed because of the way they have treated you. I'm telling you the truth now. Knowing how he skinned Maggie Mem..."

"He should have been married to Bela who would have thrashed

him till he came to his senses," Chandni interrupted him with a laugh.

"You are a strange girl! This a serious matter and you are laughing about it."

"I have put up with all that has befallen me till now. I'll bear the rest, too."

"That means you, too, want the wealth."

"Don't you? Why else are you so opposed to Vicky Miyan's marriage?"

"You want to become the mother of abnormal, retarded children just for wealth and respectability?"

"You tell me where I should go, what I should do."

"Can't you find some employment?"

"First I should find a job, then a room in some hostel. Then...?"

"Yes, and then Vicky Miyan of Teen Katori. Even if he is half-mad—you are not going to get him. Listen to me; I am saying this for your own good. Zarina and Safia, because of their personal circumstances, are extremely frustrated and cranky women. They will make life hell for you. Amma is very vain. The airs of feudalism still haven't left her. She considers herself the empress of the world. And Vicky is what he is."

Chandni kept looking at the flying silk-cotton flowers. How far each flower travelled, where did it disappear? In Zafarpur, when the silk-cotton bloomed, dew collected all night in its red flowers. Early in the morning, beautiful, long-beaked birds would come and drink the dew from these cups.

"What are you thinking about, Chandni?"

"Carry on with what you were saying."

"What sort of life are you going to lead in this prison? Listen to me. My wife doesn't understand me..."

"Oh no," Chandni got up from the bench.

"I have a house in the jungles lying vacant. I will make arrangements for you there—servants and everything else. Leave here, saying you are going to Zafarpur."

"Bobby Miyan, you are a hyena."

"What?"

"Yes, a child-lifter, all the way."

Bobby snatched the file from her.

"Gold-digger! I thought you were a simple, innocent girl—what difference is there between you and Bela?" He walked quickly towards the house.

Surprised at herself, Chandni smiled. She always prayed to Allah Miyan to give her the courage to face strange, frightening and unexpected situations. And Allah had given her that. Oh kind God, how do I thank you for this?

*

The kadam trees in Rajasthani paintings look so romantic and beautiful. It was in the shade of the kadam tree that Krishna used to play his flute. She passed through the grove and saw a panditji wearing a tilak on his forehead. He was sitting with a few open registers and was busy reading and writing. A red-winged parakeet was sitting on a bent branch over his head, watching the goings-on in the garden.

She walked ahead. On the outside lawn, Zarina Sultan's children, Pinky and Amina, Parveen's young kids, Dinky and Feroza, and the dearly beloved children from Shirin Castle, Filly and Mehnaz, were vigorously playing 'Sun and Shade' with Baby, the fat son of Rana Narayan Baksh Singh. In the portico stood the small tum-tum carriage. Some child had stuck flowers behind the ears of its Shetland pony, and it too looked euphoric. Dressed for the weather, Filly and Mehnaz's mother, Mrs Manek Bai Dhondy, in a yellow silk sari and a diamond brooch, had gone inside. Wearing the sari in the Parsi style with a blouse of exquisite lace, the delicately-built Mrs Dhondy appeared like the 'Parsi Beauty' of the 1916 Urdu 'aesthetic' novels. She was a friend of Zarina Sultan, and Sona Kali had told Chandni that whenever a wedding was fixed, Mrs Dhondy was invited immediately as an advisor and she, from the moment she arrived, with great sincerity

and speed, would start helping with the arrangements. Chandni smiled. There was joy in her heart. All the sorrow, anxieties and distress had disappeared.

Manek Bai's ayah, Dil Bahar, was standing under a willow talking to Sona Kali. Sona Kali was carrying a water-pitcher. The dainty branches of the willow were like green showers over their heads. Dil Bahar was wearing a thick cotton kurti and tight pyjamas. Sona Kali was dressed in a checkered-weave qameez and long flowing silk pyjama with yellow and purple stripes. Both girls were wearing yellow muslin dupattas and both looked like the Mughal, Rajput, Deccani paintings of basant in the ragamala series. The winds of spring had begun to blow and the air was cool. Baji Amma loved an old recording by Sitara—'Spring has come, play your flute, you unfaithful Mohan'. Spring was peeping from behind the trees. Mango trees had begun to flower.

It was now Pinky's turn. All the other children, laughing and making a ruckus, ran in different directions from him. Nuran went and sat on the swing again.

Chandni passed by panditji's bench.

"A Brahmin has said this is a good year."

Surprised, she looked up. Vicky was standing in front of her.

*

What a sweet, cute person he is. I haven't yet seen a whip in his hand. He roams about looking after and treating lame birds and sick parrots. Did he beat Maggie? I don't understand. Perhaps he has two personalities—a monster at one moment and a saint at another. Anyway, it doesn't matter. And if I'm not deluding myself, he is looking better and calmer since I've come here. He doesn't even get into fancy dress and make speeches anymore.

In the last two-and-a-half months she had often run into him in the garden or courtyard where she used to sit and sew in the sun. He would ask if there were blue-tailed munias where she came from; and yellow-beaked red munias. He would talk about the birds

of Terai, Nepal and Kumaon. Once he said, "Kadambari,* did you have a parrot? You should have."

"Dadi Amma used to have one."

"In a cage?"

"No, he used to sit on a stand. Hill people don't keep anything imprisoned. My Dadi was from Ranikhet."

It was out of self-respect that she had never told Vicky Miyan about her family; the Nana who owned fifty-two villages, the Dada who was a Khan Bahadur, not this, nor that. What if he, too, like Parveen Sultan, had mocked and laughed at her? He always behaved respectfully and very honourably towards her.

"Did that parrot ever tell you stories?"

"He used to tell Dadi Amma. She understood his conversation."

"Kadambari's parrot told her fascinating stories. She appeared in the guise of a chandal† though," he added in a conspiratorial note, "she was an apsara."

"An apsara?"

"Kadambari, if you want, you can call the spirits of heaven the houris of paradise! It's all a matter of words."

Just the one subject of a moon, he would paint in a hundred different ways.

"Chandni! Right now you are the moon in Scorpio or the new moon of the third month which, if entrapped in a water pot, is in great pain."

"A prince comes and saves him too!" Chandni answered with a smile.

"Chandravali—the moon and just moons, a row of moons. Dazzling! *Chandrayen.*#

"Chandrayen, to rhyme with Deptiayen," Chandni replied automatically.

He laughed a lot at that. "Shashi Bala, the daughter of the moon."

---

* The heroine of the Sanskrit novel *Kadambari* (written in 616 A.D.).

† The fifth and lowest caste in ancient India.

The masnavi of the bhakt sufi Mullah Daud.

While his family avoided him, she would listen attentively to what Vicky Miyan said and would try and understand him.

She stopped beside the Chandni tree. Vicky Miyan looked at her intently and then smiled like a child. "The tree-girl...!"

"What?"

"The tree fairy, the soul, the spirit!"

He stopped under the kadam tree and began to speak. "Ras Khan says that if I be a man, then I'm a cowherd of Gokul; if I'm an animal, then one of Krishna's cows; if a stone, then I'm a part of the mountain that Krishna lifted; and if I be a bird, then I will nest on a tree beside the Jamuna."

"Vicky Miyan, what is he writing with such attention?"

"You mean Durga Prasad Mishra? For appearances, he keeps the account for our jungles. He is a pure soul. Just air. One day he will merge with the winds in the jungle. All of us are bewildered souls. Submarines diving in the lake of the horizon—you should do one thing. For the time that is called our borrowed lives, get a horoscope made.

"Panditji, this is Chandni Begum. Please draw up her horoscope. She is a confused and troubled water-hen which has emerged from its lake. She is the chiff-chaff bird."

Pandit Durga Prasad looked at Chandni intently but kept quiet.

"Will you, Panditji?"

"I'll draw one up, Bhaiyya."

"Don't try and put me off, Panditji. All right, it doesn't matter, don't do it. What difference does a horoscope make?"

In the garden, the faint sound of the children's laughter became louder.

"Listen to that. The voices of the future hiding from the leaves, reach us!" Vicky Miyan said, quoting T.S. Eliot.

A car drove in and stopped.

"Oh ho! Narayan Baksh Singh—I had asked him to get a few rare plants from the Himalayas—God take care of you, Chandni Begum, khuda hafiz." He left.

"Panditji, may I go, too?"

"Go, Bitiya, khuda hafiz."

Safia Sultan peeped out from a window on the second floor. First she saw Vicky Miyan walk past on the garden path, and then Chandni. The sunlight had climbed down from the trees and was edging towards the river. Across the river, far away, Red Rose was hidden among its dense gardens. The water of the Gomti turned into molten gold. Then copper. Soon it would be night. Another useless, meaningless, disappointing, lonely day of life passed.

*

"Last night Bobby quarrelled with me again," Parveen told her mother. "You've got involved in these arrangements without giving a thought to what Bela meant when she brought her here. She repeatedly said that the situation had become such that Chandni had to resign from her college. The situation was such—! Have you ever even made enquiries about her with people in Zafarpur? What was this 'situation'? And Bela treated her as if she was a sworn enemy. God has suddenly opened up the doors of the treasury for her. Are you listening to me? Bobby is a very mischievous man. Why are we unnecessarily asking for trouble?"

Ilaichi Khanum walked in like a roving cat. "Bitiya, Chandni Begum is saying all the clothes are ready. Come and take a look."

Parveen got up from her chair. "All your life you have done just as you pleased. Now just be a bit...."

"All right. You send Chandni away. How can she continue to stay here after this?" her mother said.

Nuran had already told her about the commotion Bobby had created the previous night, but Chandni had stood firm in her decision. Once we are married what can they do to me? Raja Sahib is there to protect me. But she was there in the sewing room and had heard the conversation between Rani Sulat Zamani and her daughter, Parveen Sultan. She made an immediate and final decision.

In this bunch of haughty individuals, he was the only person who was a gem. Perhaps a true penitent, an ascetic. Ya Allah, keep him in

your protection. Aye Allah, for the sorrow of my humiliation which the souls of my dignified Dada and my self-respecting mother have had to bear, I ask for forgiveness from them with folded hands, and Allah you are witness that through this great trial that you have inflicted on me, over this extended period, I have atoned slightly for the conceit of my fifty-two-village-owning Nana and his forbears.

She moved towards the sewing machine.

Parveen came into the room. Chandni was sitting on the floor with the clothes spread before her.

"Please tell Rani Sahib that I do not accept her plan."

"Bobby must have said something."

"Think what you want. I too have a mind. And being caught in this extraordinary situation, I became very confused."

"Will you come to America?"

"America?"

"As a domestic help. There, girls from excellent families do some baby-sitting."

"Yes, I know."

"Then you can learn to type, etc. Pakistani and Indian men, one better than the other, will want to marry you."

"Why have you suddenly turned so sympathetic towards me? You didn't once tell your mother to put a bed for me in the room where I did my sewing."

"You must know what Amma is like. And then she began getting room after room done up for you here and in Nainital. Anyway, think about it. Write and bring me details about yourself. Bobby will immediately get your passport and visa done."

"All right. I hope there is no trick in this?"

"What do you mean? You think I will deceive you? I'm doing you a good turn, and this is what you say? Go, write and bring me your application for a passport—"

A spring came to Chandni's step. She walked quickly to the maids' veranda before she realised that she would find a pen only in the kothi, so she returned. Parveen was about to go to Hazratganj for 'last minute' shopping. Chandni asked Zarina's son, Pinky, for

paper and pen and sat down to write the application for a passport and visa.

Pinky went and informed his grandmother. "Nanno—Nanno—Penny Khala is taking Chandni Baji with her to America as an ayah."

"Call your Parveen Khala immediately!"

Outside, Parveen and Safia had already got into the car when Pinky came running.

Penny pulled a long face and went inside. Rani Sahib thundered, "You've always been an ass! Aye, Parveen Sultan, have you lost your mind like Vicky? You plan to take Chandni with you to America and keep her with you? She is younger than you and good to look at. She is also more intelligent than you, and crafty too. She agreed to marry Vicky as soon as she arrived here and we know what your husband is like—he is a philanderer and you never tire of complaining about him. Girls of today are so stupid but, Parveen, you've crossed the limit."

"Aye hai, I never thought about that. I'm confused. Bobby suggested that I take her with me. And you said just now that some arrangement should be made to send her away. It's true, you're right. But she is already writing out an application for her passport. Poor thing, she is so delighted. Her life would have been made."

"Go ahead, make her life and ruin your own. Well done."

"What shall I tell her now?"

"Tell her you've received a letter from your husband, and they have found an ayah there."

The next morning after breakfast, Chandni handed over the application to Parveen.

"It...it so happens...Chandni...." Parveen said in an embarrassed tone. "I talked to you in the morning, and in the evening I got a letter from my Sahib Bahadur. My sister-in-law has arranged for an ayah in Karachi. It's easier this way. You are an Indian national, we will have problems with getting your nationality changed."

Chandni looked at her for a few moments and then tore up the

application and threw it down. Then she picked up the pieces and took them to a corner of the courtyard where Angoori was sweeping.

*

On the third day after Parveen had left for Pakistan, Vicky Miyan was sent to Nainital to 'watch the snow'.

Safia never spoke. Zarina's older daughter, Shehla, alias Shelly, was very studious and was always busy with her college studies. Amina, alias Amy, was very young. Pinky was usually up to mischief. Father's disciplining is essential, Ilaichi Khanum would say—his grandparent's indulgence has ruined the boy. Not once has his father enquired about him nor has he ever called him over.

Chandni was no longer interested in this family's problems. Every moment of living here was hard for her.

Ilaichi Khanum who had begun resenting her was no longer worried.

The way for her granddaughter was clear again.

Chandni spent entire days just sitting on her cot.

A few days after Parveen Sultan's departure Chandni suggested that she teach Pinky and Amy Urdu. Pinky was incredibly naughty. Zarina's response was, "He has no time from his destructiveness and rowdiness. Yes, go ahead and teach him Urdu. But how much can children study? English, Hindi, French—now Urdu! Aye, Chandni you are—"

"Yes, don't worry. I will go away soon."

She went to her veranda and into Ilaichi Khanum's room and locked the door. She spread out the prayer mat and prostrated herself on it—Ya Allah, show me a way. She sat in the dark room for a long time, thinking. Return to Zafarpur? To Banne Chacha's house? But his wayward and depraved sons were there.

Should I go to Mrs Dhondy's? She will help me. But how can I just land up at the home of these Parsis who are complete strangers? According to Sona Kali, Dhondy Memsahib was furious at the way these people had gone about setting up the match, and then with

the graceless, rude way in which they had ended it. "She is genuinely sympathetic towards the older Bhaiyya and she couldn't bear the way you were insulted. She said to the eldest Bitiya, that no matter how poor the girl is, she should not have been humiliated like this. As if she has no self-pride."

As soon as Vicky heard about this, he had turned completely silent, and was immediately sent off to the hills. What wicked people these are. If I were to go to Mrs Dhondy's house, her relationship with this family would be ruined. Or I could go to the employment exchange, or to Karamat Husain Girl's College. So many students from Zafarpur have been admitted there. I'm sure to find some acquaintance or the other. Or get on a train and go to Delhi. Mamu's address—his old address is there in the notebook—I could go there and find out. A former pupil is married and lives in Ballimaran; I could try and trace her. But all these were terrible options. Almost impossible—where will I stay when I reach Delhi? In the Ashoka Hotel? Obviously not, and even if I was to find Mamu, then what? Who knows, he might be dead by now. What is this, Allah Miyan? What is this mess you have put me into? Tauba tauba, Allah, forgive me, my Allah.

Ringing up Qambar and Bela was out of the question. She wiped her face with her hands and realised they were wet with her tears.

She went out and sat on her haunches next to the tap and picked up her soap-dish from among the guava branches. Before washing her face, she took off her spectacles and put them on the ridge around the tap. A few minutes later, when she stretched her hand out for them, they were gone. Perhaps they had fallen over. She could see faintly that Zarina's mischievous son was standing on the veranda holding them.

"Arrey, Pinky Miyan, my spectacles…"

He laughed and ran away. Chandni got up and ran after him.

"Promise me that you won't teach us Urdu."

"Allah, tauba. Forgive the seven generations before me. I will not teach you. Give me my spectacles."

He ran off again. Chandni finally caught him and in the scramble to get them from him, the glasses fell on the floor and both lenses broke.

Wiping her face with her dupatta, she returned to the room. The notebook in which she had noted the power of the lenses was locked in her suitcase. She had hidden her key behind some dust-covered empty bottles in a broken-down niche. She opened her suitcase. Turned over all her clothes looking for the notebook. Then she thought perhaps she had kept it in her jewellery box when she was leaving Zafarpur.

The box had disappeared.

Her nerves had given way from the way she had spent the last three months in Teen Katori House. She came out of the room and fell on her bed. She shivered, and ran a temperature and stayed in bed for three days. When she recovered, she couldn't speak. With difficulty she said to Khush Qadam, my jewellery has been stolen.

*

Ilaichi Khanum went and informed Rani Sahib. "I don't know what's happened to Chandni Begum. She is saying strange things. Now her jewellery has been stolen. Since she's come here, every day there is some new trouble because of her. Till now she's never mentioned that she had any jewellery with her. If she had, she could have given it to you to keep in your safe."

The maids collected on the veranda and began exchanging opinions. "Why did she keep the jewellery in a broken-down room? Now we are being accused of theft." Ilaichi Khanum appealed, "Will someone tell her to go somewhere else."

Lying covered from head to toe with a blanket, Chandni kept hearing these voices. Through her closed lids, she saw the colour red as the sun came in through the tiny holes of the blanket.

A little while later she gathered up courage and got up. The servants had all gone to the kitchen. A lone crow was sitting in the door. Out of habit, she stretched out her hand to retrieve her

spectacles from where she usually placed them, under the bed before sleeping, then remembered that pest of a Zarina's son had broken them.

She walked slowly across the courtyard, reached the gallery and went to the phone. She didn't know Qambar's number, so she picked up the telephone directory and took it to where there was more light. It was hard for her to read without her glasses but she held it close to her eyes and looked for the number.

Idu answered the phone. "Yes, Sahib is in. Wait, I'll call him."

"Hello, I'm Chandni Begum—from Teen Katori House."

"Cha.... Chandni?" she heard Qambar Ali say. "Adaabarz. Yes, yes, Bela mentioned you, but I couldn't come. I am constantly looking out for a job for you. Are you all right?"

"No—I'm not all right."

"Arrey, I'm sorry. What's happened?"

"These people have kept me among their servants."

"You agreed to a marriage and then cancelled it."

"And then my spectacles broke. Then my jewellery was stolen. Then I got a fever. Now they are telling me to leave."

"Don't worry."

"So much has happened, and you tell me not to worry. The little jewellery that was left with Baji Amma was all that I had."

"I'm coming, immediately."

Chandni looked at the clock above the door. It was three in the afternoon. She put down the receiver and came back to her veranda. Lay down again and pulled the blanket over her face.

*

Qambar Ali zoomed into the portico, stopped his car and went inside. It was a long time since he had been inside Teen Katori House. Before this, he had come for Bobby's wedding reception, but had remained under the awning outside. When he reached the gallery he remembered that the Rani Sahib's room was somewhere close by—he went forward and peeped into her room. Rani Sahib

was lying on her bed, and Nuran was massaging her legs. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Chachi, Adab. It's me, Qambar Ali."

"Aye hai, may God be praised—come, come in."

"I've come to take Chandni."

"Well done. It's only now that you thought of her? Come, sit."

"Where is she?"

"Go, she'll be around somewhere. She's taken to her bed the last two days. Ask her why she kept her jewellery in the servant's quarters?"

"Why did you put her in the servant quarters?"

"There was no space here."

Enraged, Qambar left the room and looked around. Across the courtyard, he saw a dilapidated veranda in front of which two maids were sitting in the sun. With measured steps, he walked towards it. "Chandni...!"

She got up with a start. She saw a slightly built, short stranger standing at the head of her bed. Immediately she gathered her hair together and put on her slippers.

"Where is your luggage?" He peered into the small room,then went inside and picked up the suitcase. Her holdall was kept rolled up in a corner. A little rat jumped out of it. Chandni called out to Waziran and rolled up her bedding.

"Come on, get someone to put the luggage in the car," Qambar ordered a maid.

"My water-pot and my soap-dish...." Chandni suddenly remembered.

"All right, get those too," Qambar said crossly.

"My spectacles are broken."

"Arrey, yaar, I will have them fixed tomorrow. All the shops will be closed by now."

Chandini put on her burqa and while leaving took her soap-dish from the guava tree and picked up her lota from the ledge. The maids kept standing in the sun. Ilaichi Khanum wasn't there then.

A servant carried her suitcase and bedding. Chandni crossed the courtyard with Qambar. Stupid girl, he muttered. It was strange that there was such informality between the two, almost as if they had been childhood friends. Perhaps, Chandni thought as she climbed the steps to the veranda, it was because Bitto Khala told her every little thing about him—your cousin is fond of cricket, your cousin is a boy scout—even though he was no relative of hers. And now such familiarity as befitted blood relatives. But it's useless. What an awful fate, Allah.

They reached the gallery. "Let us say khuda hafiz to Rani Sahib." Qambar peeped into the room. Nuran gestured that she was asleep.

It was five-thirty by now. The house was deserted outside. The servant placed the luggage in the dicky. Starting the car Qambar said, "Forgive me, but I couldn't come immediately. I got delayed by office work."

Safia Sultan looked down from a balcony of the second floor.

The board of St. John's Convent had been removed from the stone balcony.

"Has her school closed down?"

"There is a school of the same name in Nakkhas. Now she is thinking of another name." Qambar burst out laughing. Chandni waved goodbye to Safia Sultan and the car drove out of the gate.

There was heavy traffic on the bridge across the river.

"Arrey, the sun has drowned in the river, as if someone has pushed it in," Chandni said.

"These people have behaved very strangely towards you. It's surprising, because they are very cultured."

"It's not people who behave well or badly, it's circumstances that make them do so. You didn't call even once. On what basis could I have stood up to them? You are perhaps afraid of your wife."

"You should have left your jewellery at my place."

Chandni set right her veil.

"Take off that burqa. This is not Zafarpur."

She took off the top half of her burqa. She felt the fresh air on her face and was revived. Happily, she started looking around.

"Have you been around here?"

"I haven't stepped outside Teen Katori House.

"I've given Rani Sahib a piece of my mind."

"Anyway—it was they who provided me shelter for three months."

Qambar Miyan asked her nothing about the marriage plans. Because of the fever, her voice had been so faint that he hadn't fully understood her on the phone. She too kept quiet.

"I don't see Vicky these days," Qambar Miyan said.

"Nainital...."

"Already? All right—to see the snow. He often does things like this—watching the rising moon, contemplating autumn. He has a relationship with flowers. He is a delightful man."

"Isn't he a bit cracked in the head?"

"Oh no, not at all. Vicky Miyan is extremely sensitive and poetic. The bloodletting that happened during the Partition sent him into shock but he recovered gradually. It would've had the same effect on me, but I'm a thick-skinned man of action. With determination to improve conditions, I jumped into the field of action. With body, mind and wealth I plunged in and will stay put. Vicky too has a revolutionary mind. But you've seen the atmosphere in his home, he was a misfit there. I changed the conditions in my house according to what I believed. Vicky couldn't do that. Did he go to Nainital alone?"

"With Bobby."

"Arrey, god help him."

"There is some friend of his, a Thakur."

"Narayan Baksh Singh."

"Yes, that's the one. He has taken him, too, with his family."

"Then it's all right. And Lala Kali Charan is also going to be there—the old faithful. Thakur Narayan Baksh Singh's brother-in-law, Raghubir Prasad Singh, is my dearest friend. This feudal network is based on generations of loyal men—but it will not survive our generation."

Instead of heading home he took the university road and slowed

down the car. "Shall we drive around a bit? There will be a kotwal sitting at home." He began talking about Vicky again. "Bobby is the same age as me, but I was a friend of his older brother. He is an extraordinary man, Chandni, a real humanist. I am apprehensive about him. The way in which his life is being wasted—you've seen his family. They are all useless and fake people. Except for his father who is an excellent man, but totally ineffective."

"And Safia?"

"A bogus romantic."

"She gave up the world because of you."

"Really? She lives in ample comfort and luxury. What does she have to do? So why not a romantic affliction. Girls who work all day in schools or as clerks in offices, where do they have the time for such romanticism? Unfortunately, Chandni, in my home it's the opposite."

"What...?"

"My wife, too, was one of those struggling poor girls. I thought she would turn into my comrade. I don't know why, but she transformed into someone like Safia Sultan. Perhaps she wants to make up for her past deprivations."

It was ages since he had found someone he could talk to, someone who knew his late mother. He wanted to pour his heart out.

"You are a very sensible girl."

"How did you figure this out in such a short time?"

Qambar Miyan pointed to his head. "Intellect! And journalistic experience! For three months you faced difficulties, but you didn't call me. You called today only because you were compelled to. If it was any other girl in your situation who had the right to ask for my help, she wouldn't have left me alone. I can figure out people from a distance. I have only been deceived once. Now, you are going to live with us. Can you judiciously counsel Bela? Her passion for shopping has become a problem for me."

"Perhaps you don't give her enough time."

"Where do I have time to waste? I'm publishing three weeklies.

I asked her to learn to type, and she lies around and reads Mills & Boons. A few months ago she had to face a major tragedy. Because of this, I too have disregarded her. Now will you please talk to her? Ammijaniya told me you used to teach psychology. Bela is only moderately educated though she has a lot of slum wisdom. I keep this in mind and keep quiet. I am very happy that you are coming home with me."

Chandni was alarmed and immediately changed the direction of the conversation. "The way you analyse Bela, try and understand Safia, too. Maybe it is not just romantic distress. She might be genuinely in love. You are very unfair to her!!"

"Love—? Ha...when I decided to marry Bela I thought the same about her and me. Apart from this, Safia Begum's love for me is circumscribed by class. First of all, I'm the son of a wealthy man, and then a revolutionary. And that makes me romantic. As Patras says, first a dog, then a dog built like a goat. Which means a complete dog!"

Chandni burst out laughing.

"If I had been a bicycle-riding, street-wise comrade, then? She is pig-headed. Chandni, the bachelor cousin of my chief reporter Meraj Miyan is an excellent man, a successful advocate, but from the middle class. I had sent an offer on his behalf. Safia's family was outraged and offended. I could have tried for the Emperor of Iran, but he has just brought home a third wife!"

Chandni giggled.

The car was now on the road to Mahanagar.

"Come, let me show you a few things." Qambar speeded up and then brought the car to a halt by the side of a road. Ahead was a crumbling white kothi hidden by wild growth.

"Do you see those ruins? Mirza Hadi Ruswa once lived there. He had fallen in love with a European beauty. Perhaps she came to study mathematics with him. He used to sit on that open terrace and wait for her." The deserted terrace glimmered like the lunar landscape in the gathering dusk."Neither the passion nor the beloved survived." Qambar continued.

Chandni turned and took a hard look. Since she did not have her spectacles, everything seemed a blur to her.

"Listen to this couplet of Jaan i Alam Pia—

Where the jungle is now, beyond it once
A garden, flowers and me. And there was a gardener.

He turned the car around and drove rapidly towards Red Rose.

A few minutes later he said, "You should at least have put your jewellery in Rani Sahib's safe."

"I forgot all about it. From the moment I reached, I got so caught up in sewing and other worries that I never thought about it. The day before yesterday, when I was looking for my notebook, I looked into the folds, and it was gone."

"Shall I tell you something, Chandni Begum," Qambar Ali said as he drove into the garden of Red Rose. "I, too, have been so involved with my work for the last three or four years that I forgot about the matter that Ammijaniya spoke to your mother about. I, too, put away a precious thing in the folds and forgot about it."

*

Munshi Bhawani Shankar Sokhta was standing on the veranda. Once again he carried Chandni's luggage in. Qambar entered the drawing-room and called out to Idu. "Come in, have some tea. Bela has gone to the beauty parlour. Tomorrow some journalists are coming for dinner. From the *London Times* and other papers. There will be other people, too. You will get to meet a few of them. There might be opportunities for finding a job."

Idu appeared with the tea-tray. There was a lot of activity in the house. In the dining room, Ramzani was taking out crockery from the sideboard, Zaitun was busy polishing the silver cutlery, Bhagwan Din and Phatku were cleaning the flower vases.

"All this should be completed before Begum Sahib returns otherwise everyone will be in trouble," Zaitun was heard saying. Chandni's eyes fell on the portraits of Barrister Azhar Ali and Bitto Begum. The red velvet fringes over the fireplace had very delicate

beadwork on them. "I remember," Qambar said. "Ammijanya told me that..."

"Yes, Baji Amma made this fringe and gifted it to Bitto Khala."

Putting down her tea cup, Chandni again said, "My spectacles broke."

What a silly girl she is, saying the same thing over and over again. "Arrey, I've told you I'll have them made tomorrow morning. Now go and get some rest. How is your fever?"

Munshiji came in with some papers.

"Bhawani Chacha, show Bitiya the way to her room. Thank God Bela hasn't converted it into a breakfast room yet or you would have had to stay in the turret outside."

She got up from the sofa and went inside with Munshiji. When they reached the door to the gallery, Sokhta said, "Go straight ahead. The last room on the veranda is the guest room. I have had your luggage put there. If you need anything, call Zaitun."

"Thank you, Munshiji."

She walked ahead but couldn't see very clearly. Three doors opened onto the veranda. All of them had the same thick, silk, flower-patterned curtains across them. Thinking that it was the last room, she moved the curtain aside and went in. Saw a bed. She was exhausted because of the fever she had had for three days. What an attractive and pleasant place this was. In a glass vase on the bedside table were roses which smelt beautiful. She fell on the bed as soon as she entered.

She fell asleep.

A little while later Qambar came in and saw that the lady was asleep on his bed. He realised that this crisis was the result of the broken spectacles. Amused, he was about to return when he ran into Bela in the doorway.

This was an awkward situation, like a romantic comedy play. Qambar let out a mortified laugh. Bela threw her bag on the bed. Scared, Qambar knew that this was a declaration of war.

Chandni woke up with a start. Then, as was her habit she extended her hand under the bed looking for her spectacles.

Suddenly, the situation became apparent to her. "Allah, have mercy," she exclaimed loudly.

"Amen," said Bela venomously.

She got up slowly.

Because of her poor vision, she couldn't see her pink rubber slippers on the pink carpet. She found them with her hands. "Where is the guest room?"

Bela kept quiet. Qambar had escaped with his life. Chandni came out into the veranda, entered the adjoining room and lay down.

A little while later, she got up and examined the room. She went up to everything and looked at it carefully. It was furnished with very expensive things. Old French furniture with striped gold upholstery, excellent curtains.

Had Bitto Khala been this rich?

A clean sparkling bathroom, clean white-fringed curtains in the window, flower-vase in the arched niche. And in it, a single rose artistically placed. She realised what a good housewife Bela was. And she is also the owner of this house—the lady of the house.

She began to cry. Splashed water on her face and put her face close to the mirror over the washbasin and had a look. She was all right. If I spent hours in the beauty parlour like Bela then I, too,—anyway, I will survive somehow. But how will I survive—broke and homeless?

She came back and sat on the bed. Kept stroking the beautiful bedcover. At eight-thirty Idu came to the veranda and called out.

"Bitiya, come, dinner is served."

She had forgotten about dining tables and chairs after spending three months eating in the kitchen, sitting on a little stool. In any case, when was the dining table ever laid in Zafarpur after Dada Miyan's death? After Abba disappeared Baji Amma just about managed to provide for their two meals. Mother and daughter would put their plates on the rough table near the bed and eat their meals. Books were placed on this same table which was also used for ironing.

There was silence at the dining table. Bela was quiet. Chandni thought that the woman had shown her true colours. Qambar was feeling extremely humiliated by Bela's coarse behaviour. How could he now ever complain about the bad conduct of the people at Teen Katori House? He started a conversation.

"What is the weather like in Zafarpur?"

"Same as here. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter."

"The hills are so close; it must be much colder there."

"Yes, it is."

"I've only been to Zafarpur a couple of times, as a child with Ammijanya. Do you have any information about my mamus?"

"No. If they had been in Zafarpur, I would have gone straight to them from the principal's home. It's under extreme compulsion that I came here. And I am sorry that I'm troubling you now. If my jewellery hadn't been stolen, I could have...."

"Don't be silly. What trouble? I will soon arrange something good for you," Qambar said. "Relax and stay here. It's your Khala's home." He laughed again. "Isn't this strange. These idioms of ours, Khala's home, Nani is dead. Why don't we ever say Phuphi's house or Dadi is dead?"

Zaitun had come in with warm chapatis. "Maternal relatives are more affectionate than paternal ones," she said.

"Ha ha, my maternal relatives left their only sister and went away. Chandni, will you have some coffee?"

"No."

"What about some tea."

"No, thank you."

"All right, then let's go to sleep. Bela has a lot of work to do tomorrow morning. We have dinner for fifty. The guest list keeps growing," he laughed an empty laugh.

"Tell me what to do, and I will help. If there is any particular dish you want, I can cook it," Chandni said to Bela.

"Sure, sure. All right then, goodnight," Bela said icily.

Chandni returned to her room. She left the door slightly ajar. The slight nip in the air was very pleasant. She sat down on her bed,

removed the heavy Chinese bed cover. She looked at the bunches of flowers on the satin quilt. The sheet was as cold as ice. Thick, soft, imported pillows. She had never in her life slept in a bed like this.

Dada Miyan was well off, but there was none of this imported stuff in his house—Aye hai, she had forgotten her toothpaste and toothbrush in the niche in the small room. Shall I go and ask Bela for toothpaste? Her bedroom was close by, into which she had mistakenly barged in. Allah no, absolutely not. Allah, let my new spectacles be ready tomorrow.

She returned from the bathroom and changed her clothes. She sat on the bed. What a soft, comfortable bed! Thank you, Allah, for giving me such a comfortable bed after that broken-down cot in the veranda. Then she began the rest of her prayers. Ya Allah, wherever my Abba is, let him be alive, happy and well. Oh merciful God, the Lord of the Universe, give my Baji Amma a place in heaven. Let her soul be assured of my safety. Also those of Dada Abba and Dadi Ammi. And make some excellent provision for me so that I don't wander anymore, an unwanted guest everywhere. Ya Allah....

Sounds of a quarrel arose from the master bedroom. She postponed the rest of her prayers in order to listen.

"Why did you bring this trouble-maker here?"

"What trouble has this poor thing caused?"

"There is some maid of theirs called Ilaichi Khanum who keeps calling Zaitun. She told Zaitun that Chandni tried to entrap that mad son of theirs. Who knows what mischief she will make here? We still don't know why she was turned out of Zafarpur."

"Bela, speak softly, voices carry. Have you thought of the menu for tomorrow night?"

"Your brains, my liver and that witch as mincemeat."

"Aren't you ashamed of saying such things about a helpless girl?"

"Have you opened an orphanage?'

"I have opened a rescue home. There were calls, one after the other. Help me; free me from the clutches of my cruel parents. You play-acted very well."

"I know that this Munshi Kofta…"

"Sokhta…"

"He poisons your ears against me."

"He is a scholar of Urdu, Persian and Sanskrit. At least learn to respect him."

"Everyone is a scholar here. This old guy is looting your house and filling up his own. Every week, god knows what he carries away in sacks."

"Miyanjan gave him permission to take away the waste paper from the office. He is a very poor man, and he is supporting a large household in the village. He is honest and loyal…."

"Why didn't your wonderful, precious father increase his salary?"

"Of course, he did. But inflation is—Damn it, Bela, shut up. Never badmouth that saint of a man, Bhawani Chacha, again."

"Everyone in your house is an angel and a saint. I'm fed up of listening to all the praise of your parents and Bhawani Chacha everyday. This old man has incited you against me. Haven't I proved myself to be a good wife?"

"You are a spendthrift, rude and neurotic. You jumped into a well without a thought. You have made my life hell. The bills from the shops don't stop. Don't get on my nerves."

"Everything in this house is ancient. I want to make it ultra-modern in the Swedish style."

"You lived in a palace in Bombay, didn't you? It's surprising, Bela, how quickly people forget their past. You embarrassed me at the dinner table today. You insulted a guest."

"I own this house, and no one can come as a guest without my permission."

"Bela, go to Bombay so that I can have some peace."

"Why should I go? This is my house, I can turn you out. Along with this puffed-up hen."

"I'll put up a tent in the garden."

"You forget that you have gifted the garden to me, too. Amma and Abba are worldly-wise. They told me that you are a wealthy

man and whenever you want to marry another you will impose her upon me. I took precautions."

"I have brought her, this poor girl, and imposed her on you? Bela, have you lost your mind? In Miyanjan and Ammijaniya's time, this house used to be full of guests. All sorts of needy people came here and stayed for weeks. Both of them would try and help them. They were hospitable even to uninvited guests. And here, you have lost your mind over a half-blind, simple girl in a few hours. Keep quiet or I will get furious."

"You have just accused me of fraud—that I was play-acting."

"Prove me wrong."

"Believe me, I swear, I did not marry you for your money."

"No, you married me in the national interest."

The lights went out.

"This load-shedding is a nuisance."

"Why don't you shed some load too? Why don't you send this cursed woman away tomorrow?"

"In a week or two, I will make arrangements for her in some working women's hostel."

"And you will pay for the hostel?"

"What should I do then? Should I turn her out onto the streets? Tomorrow I will talk to Kenneth Hardy, the guy from the British High Commission, about her immigration. These days lots of people are migrating to Britain. I have sent for the papers."

"Oh ho..."

"That is why I did not contact Chandni Begum while she was in Teen Katori House. I wanted to arrange everything first."

"What will she do there? Roast gram in a furnace?"

"Gram is not roasted in furnaces there."

"Even her jewellery has been stolen. Who will pay for her passage? All petty thieves say the same—I've lost my purse, my bedding has been taken, and what have you. Even if she had any jewellery, how do we know it was hers? She might have stolen it in Zafarpur and run away. She had jewellery! Just look at her, she dresses like a beggar."

"Bela, don't forget how you were dressed when you came to Red Rose for the first time."

"So will you buy her ticket to London?"

"Why not? How much does ship passage cost anyway? Can't I even do that for my Khala's daughter?"

"Oye, hoye—just take a look at the Khala's daughter."

"Once she's in London she can become a supply teacher in some county school."

Chandni Begum was miserable hearing herself being mentioned like this. First, she was being sent to America, now to England.

The late Bitto Begum's dressing-room was situated between the two rooms. Doors from both rooms opened into it. Because of the electricity failure, it was pitch dark. Chandni Begum got out of bed and reached the dressing-room. She stumbled on the mattresses and quilts that had been piled high in the corner. She sat there with her ear to the door.

"It's Allah's glory that you are sending this vulgar woman to England and I waste my time here."

"Bela, you have gone crazy?"

"Why don't you marry her?"

"That can happen, too, it will please Ammijaniya's soul no end. I have hurt the souls of both Miyanjan and Ammijaniya by creating a relationship with the troupe of Lotun Kabutar and Parizada Gulab."

"This is the disciple of Karl Marx speaking. Long may he live!"

"Don't chatter so much. The spoilt domni is singing out of tune."

Bela jumped up from the bed. She picked up an ashtray and aimed it at Qambar's face. In the dark, it missed him. "Divorce me right now and get out of the house by tomorrow morning!"

Qambar stroked his face and began to laugh. "Let tomorrow's dinner get over. If I go away in the morning what will our guests say...."

"Give me the marriage contract."

"The marriage contract...? Oh yes, where is it? I had forgotten it at Raghubir Prasad's house. He brought it and gave it to Al Hamdu Khala, and you turned her out, dear wife. Now you tell me how I

should get the marriage contract. I am going to have some vodka. You have provoked me enough with this incredibly inappropriate conversation."

"You are already drunk. Copies of all marriage contracts are available with the Qazi of the city. In Bombay at our chief Qazi Morghe's place all...."

"What a priceless name that is, Qazi Rooster."

"I want the garden papers tomorrow morning."

"What will you do with those? They are of no use to you."

"Why?"

"I have signed as Qamar Ali instead of Qambar Ali on them. And they are not even registered."

Bela flung the timepiece and a couple of ashtrays at Qambar. She lit a torchlight. She flung a Swedish crystal vase that was kept in a corner at him. It hit the wall and broke into smithereens.

Qambar looked at it sadly. "You broke that, too. Bela Rani Shokh, that was Ammijaniya's favourite vase."

"May your Ammijan go to hell," she gritted her teeth and screamed.

"Have you decided to completely...?" He slapped her with all his might. Then a second and third time. Bela's mouth was now full of blood.

"All this while I thought you were a mental case and therefore put up with your violence! Go, gargle with Dettol."

Bela returned from the bathroom, collapsed face down on the bed and began to sob. In the light of the torch, Qambar picked up the shards of the vase and left the room.

Chandni was sitting on the mound of quilts, listening. She was worried for Bela. I wonder how many teeth she has lost. If one doesn't have one's spectacles or one's teeth, it can lead to all sorts of problems. This was truly an all-out fight—tomorrow morning she will go to the dentist. Hope he drops me off at the optician's.

She got up and quietly felt her way back to her room.

She sat down on her bed.

Half an hour passed.

There was a sound, but in the pitch dark, she couldn't see a thing. Qambar was standing in the doorway.

In a hoarse voice, he said, "I am very sorry—very sorry for everything. Forgive me, but don't forgive that bitch for anything. She insulted the honour of my Ammijaniya—that great departed lady."

He stumbled out. Went to his bedroom and fell on his bed.

*

Chandni kept waiting for the moon so that in its light she could get up and bolt her door. The moon, bright with phosphorous, kept rolling across the sky like a ball in a polo match but didn't come towards her window. She pulled up the quilt, leaned on her pillow and reclined on the bed. She had arrived here after sunset and now it was perhaps one o'clock at night. What a horrific evening this had been. Had there been any less terrifying nights at Teen Katori House? Lying down exhausted she lazily reviewed her life. Sometimes there had been good days; life hadn't always been this scary. Her Dada's house, surrounded by blue hills, colour on all sides, purple gravel, tall green grass, grey walls, bunches of frangipani and bachelor's buttons. Fun and frolic with her cousins; Dada and Dadi's pampering. We used to drive up the hills in our jeeps every day. That was a great life, but apart from that—apart from that there was only hardship. Although she had taken great pleasure in passing her examinations. What else? Were there any other golden days? She dozed off. Heard Dada Miyan's voice. Miyan Nur Posh, the whistling thrush has come to greet you, Chandni Beta. Get up and say your prayers. She sat up immediately—Dada Abba—Dada Abba—Adab—the response was silence and darkness. From the master bedroom came the sounds of Qambar's snores. Poor guy has fallen asleep. What a kind man he is and what a wrathful wife he has.

The electricity still wasn't back. And how was the moonlight going to get in because there were heavy curtains on the window? I have no idea how one pulls the cords. There must be a way. In an English movie she had seen a maid in a black frock, white apron and

white cap come in and smoothly pull the golden cords and there was light. I won't even be able to see the cords in the dark. How shall I go to the bathroom? In England are the rooms decorated the way Bitto Khala has decorated this room? The entire Red Rose looks like the house of an old Englishman, like the pictures in Charles Dickens' novels. May Allah reward Qambar, he is making arrangements to send me to England. Why shouldn't I go? Are the ones who go very special people? Tomorrow, no today, for it is today now, this evening Qambar's British friend will tell him. He will bring the papers. May Allah bless Qambar. Then I will work in England, save money and come straight back to Zafarpur and restore the house, inshallah. After Dadijaniya's death, younger Chachi arrived immediately from Pakistan to take her share of the jewellery—Aye hai, Bhabhi, why are you still sitting among these ruins? Baji Amma had said, Dulhan, you are aware of my circumstances. And her coquettish daughters! Aye hai, Chandni, what a rotten place you live in. Baji Amma told them, you were born in this house, too.

She had brought a suitcase full of her shiny, Japanese-silk cast-offs for me. Apa, take this new wristwatch, these sandals too. I would have brought other things, but there is a problem with customs. Then Shujju Bhai said, we don't travel in buses. We took a taxi from Delhi airport to Zafarpur. We stopped at many tea stalls on the way and drank tea in glasses. There were so many flies! All those awful people and in front of those shops lay those—what do you call them? Those things strung with ropes—string—string. Baji Amma said, string cots. Yes, yes, those. Baji Amma said, Beta, have you never seen these cots before? You were fifteen or sixteen when you left, you had already completed high school. And Beta, are there no such teaplaces in towns and villages there?

Allah, how tastelessly they had all begun to speak. Then Wajju Miyan got up to have a bath. He at least had been very young when they left. He opened the tap and said, Badi Amma, you don't have running hot and cold water here! Baji Amma said gently, Beta, there is a bucket and a mug in the bathroom, go and bathe. So he said—all right, a bucket—bucket and mug.

Baji Amma had said to me quietly, Chandni, what has happened to these people?

Chachi had also said, aye hai, Bhabhijan, you have begun to live like Lallu Khetis. And where we are, even Lallu Kheti has gone to England and America and become a millionaire. Baji Amma had asked—who is Lallu Kheti?

She yawned. Ya Allah, let me sleep, it's going to be morning in a little while. Chachi had grabbed more than half of Dadi's jewellery. I have three daughters, give me this, too. Give the pair of Ali bands, too. Who wears jewellery on their feet these days, and when is poor Chandni ever going to be wearing Ali bands? I'll have them broken down and made into two brow-pendants. Baji Amma kept quiet. Later she said, what could I do? I wasn't going to get into a slanging match like an ill-bred woman.

They didn't even write a letter of condolence on Baji Amma's death. And the jewellery that remained—Allah, why did you let my jewellery get stolen?

She began to cry. Ya Allah, create the world all over again. Everything that has gone wrong with this world, Allah, begin right from the beginning so that once again man becomes good.

Humans are like sealed envelopes, no one knows anything about the other. They are wrapped up parcels. Sealed pots. Some of the parcels have time bombs in them.

She wiped her tears with the palm of her hand. Touched the amber she wore around her neck.

Neither Qambar nor Vicky.

Anyway, what Allah does, he does for our good. He knows best why he does it.

Kind God, a million thanks to you. You have arranged for me to go to England. And thanks for the beautiful soft bed you have arranged for me to sleep in. She wrapped the quilt around her, sat like a bird in a nest. Peace, the feeling of safety, contentment, thankfulness.

Let me go to the bathroom. She felt the table and her hand fell on the candle-stand. There was a matchbox placed next to it.

In the evening she had noticed a silver candle-stand with a candle in it and a matchbox hidden in a silver case. Because of constant power failure there were candles in every room. She was impressed by what a good housekeeper Bela was. She picked up the matchbox. This cheap, insignificant thing was kept in a tiny silver case—in the same way as a woman like Bela was living in this kothi as Begum Qambar Ali—it's all Allah's schemes.

She struck a matchstick. It went off immediately. She remembered the Christmas story where the poor girl outside the wall of a palatial home in the snow lights a matchstick and feels comforted and at peace.

She felt for the candle-stand again, lifted it and struck another match. That too went off. She could barely see in day light, now in the total darkness she was as blind as a bat—God forbid that I be as blind as a bat. She struck a third match—and it fell from her hand onto the quilt. Flames shot up. The white candle fell on the white pillow, which she couldn't see. That too caught fire. The fire began to spread rapidly.

*

Her quilt-nest was aflame. The door and the windows began to sway in the strong draft and the room filled with flames. Like enraged pythons, the hissing flames barged into Bitto Begum's dressing-room where, three months earlier, Bela had imperiously, despite Al Hamdu's opposition, had the mattresses and quilts placed. The mounds of cotton immediately caught fire. The gas cylinders kept in the small kitchen burst. The master bedroom began to burn noisily. The sound of the exploding gas cylinders drowned the screams of Chandni, Bela and Qambar.

The formidable swirls of the flames soon encompassed the entire kothi. The fire had a field day in the offices. The fire swept through cupboards overflowing with law manuals, piles of copies of the three magazines, newspapers, bundles of newsprint, files, and reached Munshi's turret. He was sitting in the midst of piles of waste paper going through them. He got up and tried to run

but a blazing cupboard overloaded with Urdu and Persian books fell on him, and he was crushed. Rare Urdu books and religious manuscripts, the satchel holding all the family documents of the late Shaikh Azhar Ali which was kept in the custody of the Munshi, all perished in the fire. Lala Bhawani Shankar Sokhta was reduced to ashes in a pyre of paper.

*

At this time, at three o'clock in the morning, Al Hamdu was sleeping under the thatch of her home in the village of Imam Ganj in the northern district of Bahraich. Along with her, her sons, nephews, daughters-in-law and children were asleep, curled up under cotton-rag quilts. Outside, on both sides of the broad dirt road, in houses of mud and masonry with pillared verandas, the people sleeping were dreaming their dreams. Horses were tied in front of some doors. All around, the mist swirled on the green fields.

In her dreams Al Hamdu thought she saw Sarkar and the senior Begum emerge from the mist, stand next to the head of her bed and scream, Amdu—Amdu—save our son—save our son—save Bhawani Shankar!

Unnerved, she sat up. It was a freezing night in the Terai. She woke her older son and screamed, "Take me to the bus depot right now!"

"Amma, you have gone crazy," he grumbled, turned over and went back to sleep. She got up and went to her nephew. She shook him. "—the bus depot—an awful dream."

He got up rubbing his eyes. "Phuphu, your dreams have made life a nuisance. How can we go in the middle of the night?"

She described her dream. Pleaded with him. "My son, my moonlike child—."

"Phuphu, buses start running at five in the morning. You lie down and go back to sleep."

Even in the cold, she was drenched in sweat. She went into her room, stuffed some clothes into her trunk. She lit a fire with cow-dung cakes and boiled some tea. She washed for prayer and said

her supererogatory prayers. She pleaded for the welfare of Bhaiyya and the deliverance of Sarkar and Begum Sahib.

She gave her nephew a glass of tea. He wrapped a coarse woollen shawl around himself and picked up her trunk

She stumbled out of the house. The boy hitched the horse to the ekka. The animal neighed so loudly that Al Hamdu shivered.

The horse crossed the dirt road and started racing on the tarred road. Al Hamdu, holding on to the bar and clutching her trunk kept repeating,"Ya Ali, Ya Ali. The devil has entered into humans. Ya Allah, may everything be peaceful and in order at the kothi." She vowed to make an offering at the shrine of Ghazi Miyan. She found a bus ready to leave for Nanpara. Invoking Allah, she climbed in. "Phuphu, send us a card about your safety," the nephew said poking his head into the window, "God take care of you."

The engine broke down on the way. She reached Nanpara in the afternoon. She wanted tea, so she got off the bus.

A crowd had gathered around Haji Kallu's eatery. All were listening to the news, dumbfounded. Al Hamdu joined them. She fainted right there.

Having blown the horn a few times to summon the passengers back from the tea stalls, the bus driver had driven off. Al Hamdu's trunk went along with it. What could anyone have found in a poor woman's luggage? Under the folds of the newspaper lining, however, was the marriage contract of Qambar Ali and Bela, which Raja Raghubir Prasad had entrusted to Al Hamdu the previous year.

The man named Bhola Nath was a destitute thief. He kept the clothes for his wife. He was very pleased to see the envelope containing the marriage contract, assuming that there would be money in it. He opened it and found a thin green paper. To hell with it, he grumbled, tore it up and threw it away.

5
Bramble Garden

RED, Red Rose, red river, red sky. Extreme heat and bright light; the wind spread the fire to the trees. Half of the servant's quarters were scorched but all its residents escaped safely. Ramzani, Idu, Alauddin ran screaming towards the house. Natthu, the washerman, and his son jumped into the river with buckets. Bhagwan Din and Phatku took out the hose-pipes. The buffaloes, blue bull and deer broke their tethers and ran. Terrified birds resting in the trees created a hell-raising ruckus. Many of them fell to the ground, roasted.

No one understood what had happened. Why do horrible accidents happen? Has anyone figured that out yet?

By the time the fire brigade arrived, the fire had completed its work.

Prayers were said for the dead. People filled the burnt gardens and grounds. Crowds reached the road. Large, black-ribboned wreaths from the prime minister, chief minister, stalwarts of society, from representatives of journalists and political parties, and from ordinary people and friends were placed on the rubble.

Articles like 'In Memory of Qambar Ali' began to be published. Urdu literary organisations held condolence meetings for Sokhta. The press gathered in large numbers. Police took statements from the employees. The court instituted an inquiry commission. Its decision was that it was an accidental fire.

"How strange accidents are," Meraj Ahmad said to his colleagues. They were all sitting with their heads bowed among the ashes and bricks at the spot where the offices of *Red Rose, Gul e Surkh* and *Lal Gulab* used to be. "Are there ever good accidents? Accidentally, the world came into existence! Accidentally, water plants came into being! Accidentally, the world ended!"

"One feels great satisfaction in the realisation that if we are mortal then so is rest of the world. But the thought that the world of colour and smell will survive as is; that there will be more progress; that there will be other humans except us—this thought is very …very…." The editor of *Gul e Surkh* left his thought incomplete and, as was his habit, lifted his hand to toss out his cigarette. Meraj Ahmad too, wanted to tell him as he always did, to stub it out in the ashtray otherwise he might start a fire, but he kept silent.

Birdie Chhote Lal appeared with a black mourning band on her arm. She parked her bicycle at the very spot that was reserved for it. Carrying a bunch of red roses, Birdie climbed the mound of rubble. On the bouquet tied with a black ribbon, she had attached a typed card: Mr & Mrs Qambar Ali, Rest In Peace.

Having placed the bouquet on a mound of ashes, she lowered her head and stood at attention. The journalists, too, stood up. As was the convention, after two minutes of silence they all sat down. Birdie Lal looked around, spread her grey scarf out very carefully on a beam, sat down and put a tiny handkerchief to her eyes. Then in a low voice, she said, "People did not like Mrs Qambar Ali very much; you, her domestic staff, and even her husband. But I know how good-hearted she was. Her only fault was that she was outspoken. She was always misunderstood."

We all have the same complaint against the world—that we are misunderstood, thought Meraj Ahmad. He remembered the day when, at Qambar Ali's request he had gone to Rakab Ganj to investigate Ustad Mogra and his troupe, and had put in his report on his return. The arrangements he had made for the photo-feature. The mystifying evening at Raja Raghubir Prasad Singh's Chinhat house when Bela had come out to hear Alha and Udal and he had discussed politics with her. She was intelligent. Qambar Miyan could have asked her to do some work in the office. He could have taught her how to proof-read. She would have been busy and not got involved in domestic conflicts or unnecessary hassles.

They were all teary-eyed and in their own way, thinking of Mr and Mrs Qambar Ali.

The first time Chandni had come to Red Rose it was a Sunday and the second and final time she had arrived at five-thirty after the office closed. No one from the editorial staff had seen her. No one knew her or had even heard her name. The newspapers too repeatedly mentioned Mr and Mrs Qambar Ali, Munshi Bhawani Shankar Sokhta and 'a female guest'.

The widowed wives of Munshi's brothers and his daughters came from the village. They sat among the ruins and wailed inconsolably. On the third day, survivors go to the cremation ground to pick up the bones, 'flowers', of the deceased so that they can be consigned to the Ganga. In the mound of ashes, one of Sokhta's daughters found a largish scorched bone. Does this belong to pitaji or is it Qambar Bhaiyya's, she wondered? All bones are alike, she thought, so she buried it again in the ashes, dusted her hands and stood up.

Weeping and wailing, for weeks Alauddin, Ramzani, Idu, Bhagwan Din, Phatku and Natthu searched for the bones of Bhaiyya, Bahu Sahib, Munshiji and the guest Bitiya. Could searching for bones and joints buried under tonnes of beams and bricks have been easy?

Birds made their nests in the charred red skeleton of the car parked in the portico. The madhumalti creeper that covered the porch had also burnt down.

Where the jungle is now, beyond it once
A garden, and flowers and me. And there was a gardener

(Wajid Ali Shah Akhtar)

*

Soon, tales of ghosts and spirits began to make the rounds. Red Rose was declared haunted. Passers-by stopped using its private road.

Police put up a tent to guard it. Searching for valuables, thieves would emerge from the jungles along the river. The residents of the half-burnt servants' quarters would lie in their beds, scared. A wayfarer, when he spotted a torch-wielding pilferer, took him

to be a ghost and fled, screaming. Police even suspected Phatku of stealing and he bawled and bawled. Hurt by the accusation, he developed a fever. Ramzani, Alauddin and Idu grew their beards. All day they would sit in the mosque, praying. Natthu who did not know his prayers would repeat the kalima. For some time, they continued to survive on the produce of the kitchen garden. The flowers on the mango trees had been destroyed. The Shakar Goi mango trees near the gate which the late Bitto Begum had allotted to the children of the servants' quarters, bore some mangoes. The servants ate these with rotis.

*

On hearing the news, Vicky Miyan returned from Nainital. One evening, the Buick from Teen Katori House came and stopped at the gate. Wearing dark glasses, a solar hat and with a cane in his hands, he got out.

Slowly, he walked up to the ruins. Climbed on to the rubble and looked around as if he was the last surviving human standing on the earth's wreckage. He entwined his fingers, put them behind his head and called out loudly—uh hu—uh hu, the way the young Qambar Ali, Narayan Baksh Singh and Raghubir Prasad Singh would call when they got lost in the jungle during a hunt. Qambar—Qambar Miyan, arrey bhai, where have you suddenly disappeared? You are an odd man, my friend. What you do is always weird. You have even run away with my Kadambari.

The attendant said to Ramzani, "Bhaiyya had begun to get well. With this shock, he has lost it again."

Bending down, Vicky Miyan kept looking for something with the tip of his cane.

Ramzani came running. "Salaam, Miyan. What are you looking for?"

Bhagwan Din, too, rushed forward, "Salaam, huzoor."

"Caretaker of the woods! The tree-girl?"

"Huzoor....?"

"Chandni...."

"The chandni tree dried up on its own—long ago."

He climbed down the mound of bricks and stumbled. His attendant helped him. He got into the car and left.

Forty days after the tragedy, the limousine from Teen Katori House arrived again. Safia Sultan dismounted, accompanied by a sniffling Nuran who cried with much fuss remembering Chandni. Safia Sultan stood quietly. They lifted their hands to pray for the dead. Then they gathered their gharaaras and climbed down from the rubble.

*

Ramzani's wife Zaitun found the amber pendant among the ashes. She cleaned it and because Allah's words were engraved on it, wore it around her neck.

Every day the servants would leave in search of employment but return disappointed. Ramzani was lucky. He found work in an English-style hotel across the river. The rest were turned away from every door because they were considered unlucky. They then gathered up their belongings and moved to other cities.

Travelling grain merchants camped in the servant's quarters.

There was a massive flood in the river, and it swept away the rubble of Red Rose. The bones of the dead too reached the river. These cousins of frogs had emerged from the water, and to it, they returned.

After the floods receded formidable machines drained the low-lying areas of the city. The fire brigade had put out the fire at Red Rose. Machines bailed out the water of the city. Despite the fire and water machines, water and fire, the moment they got a chance, caused the destruction they had to.

Villagers from nearby villages cut down the trees and took away the wood. They carried away the beams and the hinges. The water brought buried things to the surface—stone vases, a single earring, utensils, pen, and the bindings of books.

*

Every year, the flood waters took away more of the remaining rubble, and the grounds became level, green and fertile. Colourful flowers began to grow. The old seeds that Bhagwan Din had sown, and new seeds that birds brought from Lord knows where, took root. Brambles flourished. Poison berry fruit, hibiscus, golden berries. Wildfowl came and nested in the bushes. Jasmine, the four o'clock flower and chandni bushes began blooming.

Cannabis began to grow again around the disused well and white hippies hovered around it. They made the half-burnt servants' quarters their home. Sat on the ledge of the well and ground bhang and smoked ganja. They went and bowed to Mahadev under the peepal tree and sat leaning against its trunk to play the guitar. A white drug-dealer carrying a child arrived. All alone, she had flowed through Istanbul, Kabul and Kathmandu and ended up here. On the green surface of the well, aquatic plants began to spread.

"Our glorious ancestors," one male hippy informed a female hippy, pointing to these plants.

He'd stroke the green moss on the wet stone. "My grandmother."

The second hippy put coal in his chillum and squinted. "This coal, fifteen crore years ago, was a hundred foot high fern tree. By inhaling it, I become the same fern tree." Then he addressed the insects crawling on the ground. "Hello worm, hi spider, hello scorpion, good morning, lizard. Fifteen crore years ago we parted ways and we ended up in a mess, but you are still so loyal that you remember us. You come and join us in our grave. Hey—Fred—look, this ancient earthworm has come out of the river to meet you. Hello, cousin earthworm. You are happy because your brain stayed so small; ours grew larger, and we got into trouble." They would sit in a circle and smoke chillum and say we are the best sponges, the foremost moss.

Her hair strewn over her shoulders, free of any feeling, the female hippy with a spongy face set her emaciated baby down on the ledge of the well and peered in to examine her face. She wore a skirt she had made out of wild fig leaves.

Another white hippy, in drunken laziness, nibbled on a ber.

"Come on, let's move from here," the female hippy suggested.

"There's lots of time left. Millions of years," he answered casually.

The father of this poppy-head addict was a billionaire trader. The female hippy was the daughter of an intellectual in France.

"Come, let us jump into this well, Bam Bhola," another hippy called out. He wore a deer-skin and an amulet of a tiger claw around his neck. These hippies had come after spending a long time in the verdant hashish fields of Rishikesh. They would sit there silently for hours. The police finally drove them away.

The land then became a camping ground. Nomads came and left. For a few days, a group of hijras camped there. After Sulochana's death his adopted son Madhubala was now the leader of the group. A tall white-haired crazy white woman was with them. When asked her name, she would say, "The fallen star from heaven, Safed uz Zamani, Ghalicha Begum." She cooked for the group.

After the next monsoon, Jumma, the nephew of Natthu the washerman, began to cultivate arhar daal there. The land was unclaimed. If no claimants appeared for seven years, the ownership would lapse to the state.

One bright morning, a vagrant troupe of singers entered the compound.

They looked around and spotted the ruins of the servants' quarters. The rickshaw-puller dismounted and pulled his rickshaw over stones and walking tracks. Eventually, the panting rickshaw-puller deposited his passengers at the quarters. There was an old man and an old lady in the rickshaw. A colourful young man with a sharp moustache and long hair was hanging from the hood of the rickshaw. The luggage was placed in front.

A scrawny dog was sound asleep on the veranda. He woke up and started to bark, for he had appointed himself the protector of this wilderness.

Chameli Begum sat down on the ground with a thump and started wailing loudly. "Help me, Lord—Help, Lord."

"Keep quiet you fortunate one," Ustad Mogra scolded her in a gentle voice. Chameli Begum wiped her tears and said to her son, get some puffed sugar drops from the market. She gathered some twigs and made a broom and then swept the floor and opened her bedding and spread a durrie. When Gulab returned, she sat down and began reciting a marsiya. When it was over, the three stood up and recited a noha. 'The female-raven weeps in the forest, the fish in the woods, my Shyam, where is my Hussain hidden?' They then recited prayers, blessings and benediction for the dead. Having conducted the majlis for the benefit of their dead daughter and son-in-law, they sat down. "That was an ancient noha you recited!" Masterji said lighting a bidi. "The mother of Sikandar, the diharin, used to recite it. The one from Kankar Kuan. I had taught this to Bela, too." Chameli Begum then took out a hissing stove and cooking utensils. She sent for daal and rice and cooked them. Then they made some strong tea. The three of them sat leaning against the wall and then went to sleep.

Jumma, the washerman, arrived the next morning with his plough and oxen. He thought they were habura-criminals, so he ignored them.

Gulab woke up, saw Jumma and stood up. He put a leather belt over his waist-cloth in which he had hidden a Rampuri flick-knife. He swaggered up to Jumma and, in the style of film hoodlums, grabbed his shoulder from behind and menacingly asked, "Aye, with whose permission are you cultivating here?"

"With Allah's permission," Jumma laughed as he answered. "And who are you?"

"The owner of this land."

"Allah is the owner of this property," he struck the ox to make it move forward. It was Monday. Village women gathered under the peepal tree. There, around Munshi Bhawani Shankar Sokhta's Mahadevji, a wall had been raised and a small temple built. It was time for the late afternoon prayer and cowherds from nearby collected at the mosque. Jumma, wearing a turban, hurried across. Mogra and Gulab wore caps and they too went and stood in the

rows for prayer. The congregation proclaimed its intention to pray and Mogra and Gulab let their hands hang loose.

After prayers, mullahji who had begun leading the prayers in the mosque announced in a loud voice. "Will the Shia brethren please go to their mosque." The cowherds looked at the newly-arrived father and son carefully, and Jumma said, "They say that they are the owners of this compound."

They all laughed. Hadn't there been a crazy white woman who came singing and dancing with the hijras and claimed that she was the daughter of a Lord? And that strange group of white hippies! All sorts of people came and camped here. Now these two mad men had arrived. They too would go away. No one asked the family any more details.

On moonlit nights, the three sat among the stones of the courtyard. Mogra and Chameli dug the ground with tongs hoping to find something that belonged to Bela, but earthworms stuck to their fingers.

Al Hamdu had seen this scene in her dream.

Gulab said, "I am sure that Barrister Azhar Ali must have buried the treasure of his ancestors somewhere here. Only when we dig till the foundations of the kothi will we find it."

One day he said, "These bloody people don't even let us pray here, even though the mosque is our property."

"Just stay quiet about it," Chameli Begum sighed deeply.

"For how long? Our money is running out. What will we eat? We have to stake a claim on the land. Once the formalities are done, we can sell half of it and with the money build a house on a thousand square yards. With the rest, we can start making a movie. Jumma was saying this land is worth ten lakhs."

The next day was Friday. The cowherds assembled and Gulab reached there grumbling. He stood under the mihrab and announced, "Brothers, we are the legal owners of the land of Red Rose. This private mosque is part of our property, and we will pray here. You Sunnis can go elsewhere."

Mullahji began to laugh and the cowherds were amused. Gulab

stared at them. Jumma murmured, "Go, Miyan, don't create trouble. There is already enough hardship because of Shia-Sunni clashes. Go, go home."

Gulab left quietly and returned to the quarters, then said to his father. "Abba, take out the paper that Bela sent. I'll set those idiots right. Tomorrow I will go to the court and find out about court fees."

"Bhai, what is this about the court?" Jumma had returned from the mosque and his ears pricked up. Ustad Mogra now introduced himself.

"Baap re! So you have been asleep all this while?"

"When we heard the news, the two of us took to our beds. We didn't have the strength left to walk. It was just hospital to home, home to hospital and those days Gulab Miyan had to go away for work. We had no money to hire a lawyer."

"What work does he do?"

"Business."

Gulab had become the underling of a small-time smuggler in Bombay and had spent six years in jail. He had just been released.

Jumma scowled and started puffing at his bidi. If the court were to give this land to them, then his free cultivation would end. Anyway, whatever Allah wills. "When you build your house and live here, let me wash your clothes. My uncle Natthu worked here for years. He has now gone to Jeddah where he washes the jabbas of the Arabs."

Early next morning, Parizada Gulab wore his best bush-shirt and pants and combed his hair carefully. Putting the gift deed sent by his late sister into a plastic bag he headed for the Roshanara Courts.

*

"Abba, we're in trouble. At the gate itself, I ran into a Lakhnavi loafer. Badshah Jani! I said to him, if you are the beloved of the Emperor, this humble creature is called Shahzada Jani, the Prince's Beloved. Badshah Jani was very pleased and suggested that I hire a female lawyer. She has just returned after her education abroad and started her practice, he said. She is very good and is the granddaughter of Raja Sahib of Teen Katori, the daughter of his eldest daughter, Zarina

Sultan. I said, Badshah Jani Bhai, because of their gender, women are deficient of mind, and this is a man's job. Recommend some good lawyer instead. I explained the whole case to him.

"Badshah Jani introduced me to a person who also turned out to be a dandy. The moment Badshah Jani mentioned Red Rose, the lawyer said, who doesn't remember Shaikh Sahib and his parents? While he was still alive people had become very sympathetic to him because it was well known that a year and a half before this tragedy he had brough home an ordinary, unknown actress. That is why he kept her hidden and never introduced her to anyone. Her father was a harmonium player and the brother a rogue in Bombay. She was very quarrelsome. 'Set it on fire, let it burn,' was her favourite phrase. A mean person has also suggested that it was she who set the house on fire and reduced it to ashes and wiped out all traces of the family. The thing is, Sahib, there are as many versions as there are people. Anyway, tell me, how can I help you? I used to study in the university when this tragedy occurred, and even now I get goose pimples when I think about it. God save us from an evil woman.

"Embarassed, Badshah Jani introduced me and said, Sir, this is the late Mrs Qambar Ali's brother. On hearing this, the lawyer began to sweat and said he was only repeating what he had heard. Badshah Jani then told the lawyer, now it is your duty to disprove these rumours. Shaikh Qambar Ali had given the house to his wife as her mehr and also gifted the gardens to her. Please make the court restore both of these to her family. The rumours will come to an end automatically.

"The lawyer said there was another problem. A legal notice asking claimants to get in touch was published in the newspapers. Where were you then?

"Abba, how could I have said that the Bombay police had me under arrest?

"Then the lawyer enquired again; you have appeared after so many years. Where were you till now?

"Should I have said I was in jail? I showed him the stamped paper regarding the garden, and he asked if the gift tax had been

paid. Did your sister put the earnings from the garden into her account, the lawyer asked? I said, Sahib, I don't know anything about all this. He looked at the stamp paper and said Arrey! The gift has not even been registered. Now show me the marriage certificate.

"Badshah Jani said, every scrap of paper in Red Rose was reduced to ashes. The lawyer said to go the office of the Qazi of the city; the original marriage certificate will be there. It must have been registered. Find out. Then he asked again, where were you hiding all this while. I said I had to travel all over because of the shooting of films. I did not have the time.

"On hearing about movies, the lawyer beamed. He asked if I was an actor. I said, assistant director. But Lawyer Sahib, I'm a bit broke these days. What are your fees?

"The lawyer said that he had been acting in plays since he was a student—then he began talking of films again. His whole attitude had changed. He sent for tea. He said, if I come to Bombay will you introduce me to Sadhana and Saira Bano?

"I said, Lawyer Sahib, you get us our property, I will immediately start filming and give you a major role in my movie. That of a lawyer, the sort of role that Iftikhar or Rehman play. I will put in some courtroom scenes for you.

"He asked, why a lawyer? In my college plays, I was the hero! In short, Abba, I have become friends with the lawyer. I have even promised Badshah Jani a role in my films. He is the son of a wasiqadar, a pensioner of the nawabs. In appearance, he is exactly like our late Prince Gulfam. He is getting on in age, otherwise we could have cast him as the hero. The lawyer said that if I could not pay his fees, then we could agree on a percentage. When you get the property you give me my share, the lawyer said."

Chameli Begum had been lying on the durrie, asleep. The conversation woke her up. She turned over and mumbled to herself, how insensitive and heartless the father and son are! They sit on the burnt bones of my daughter, building imaginary castles. She covered her face with the end of her dirty sari and closed her eyes again.

6
Kajli Ban
The Elephant Forest

The beginning of a new era of film production in
Northern India
For the fans who remember the making of
Ideal Film Company's *Adarsh Mahila*,
Nazrana, *Rashid Dulhan*, and *Bismil ki Arzoo*
and the romantic era of Vilochna, Tara,
Akhtari Bai and Shahnaz Gul, the exciting
announcement of the new *Inder Sabha*

Gulzar e Muhabbat

Which had been announced a few years earlier and had
been postponed.
New heroine, Bewitching music
Director: Parizada Gulab
Producer: I.B. Mogra
of Red Rose Garden Estate, Lucknow

Mr T.A. Shaikh took out the cutting from one of Calcutta's Urdu papers and read it again. He had returned to the Tipu Sultan Bar at Tollygunge Club after playing a round of golf. He looked both surprised and worried. He had taken this cutting along with him when he left home this morning so that he could think about taking legal action while at the Club. A tea-planter acquaintance from the Dooars, Shunil Chakravarti, came and sat down next to him. "Are you and your elephants well this morning?"

For a long time, Shaikh Tahir had been using the nom de plume,

Sarosh, which had now become part of his name. In the Urdu-speaking circles of Calcutta, he was known as Shaikh Sarosh, the elephant-trader. At first, he used to trade in elephants trapped in Assam but now his tea and timber business was spread all over the Dooars. His wife, Nurunnisa Begum, was the fortunate daughter of a landholder of Jalpaiguri. She stayed most of the time in Darjeeling because it was close to her parents' home. Tahir Ali's younger brother, Mazhar Ali, had gone to East Pakistan where he established the family business of elephant trading and forest contracts in Chatgaam and Sylhet. He, too, was an important member of the fashionable set of Chatgaam and Sylhet and would come to West Bengal to meet his brother once or twice a year.

Shaikh Sahib had a beautiful bungalow in Darjeeling, one in Binnaguri and now a new kothi in New Alipur, Calcutta. He was among the prominent people of Calcutta and Darjeeling. He often presided over fashionable and popular mushairas organised by the Rotary and Lions Clubs. He lived the disciplined life of a Brown Sahib. He had been in touch with the jungles from the very beginning, therefore, he loved the outdoor life. Once upon a time a mahout from Mysore, Shaikh Sabu had earned a name for himself in Hollywood. In his youth, because of his association with elephants, Tahir Ali was called 'elephant boy' in the club. Now his young daughter Laila was called 'elephant girl' in her school in Darjeeling.

"Very strange." He put down the newspaper cutting on the table and took off his spectacles. "I was here in Kajli Ban and did not pay attention, and some fraudster from Bombay has usurped my cousin Qambar Ali's property."

"Arrey!"

"It's weird. I didn't have a clue about how drastically things had changed there."

"Things are changing drastically everywhere."

"I had an uncle called Azhar Ali," Shaikh Sahib said and looked up and saw the lady golfers returning from the grounds. Once in Lucknow Azhar Chacha had taken him to the Dilkusha Club. There he had seen people exactly like this, a similar crowd. Since

then nothing had changed in this colonial environment. "Barrister Shaikh Azhar Ali was my father's first cousin. Both his brothers migrated to Pakistan immediately after Partition. One, after he sold his property, and the other one, I heard, had land allotted to him in Sindh province. Then I found out that Azhar Ali Chacha's wife, Bitto Chachi's brothers also went away to Pakistan. Poor Qambar had no blood relatives left here in India."

"Who is Qambar Ali?" Planter Chakravarti asked.

"The son of the same Azhar Ali. I haven't met them for years. Nor has there been any correspondence between us. My father settled in Calcutta a long time ago. And then, in the big fire..."

"Yes, dreadful. I read about it in the papers," the planter said.

"I was on a steamer when I heard about it on the radio. I was dumbstruck. Who could I have sent condolences to? From the news, I gathered that his wife also died in the fire. I didn't even know that Qambar was married. He was a bohemian sort of a man. On the radio, there was no mention of any children."

"It's possible that the government published a notice asking for heirs to come forward," tea-planter Chakravarti said.

"Where do the newspapers from U.P. reach the jungles of Assam and Bengal, and now how has the Sanobar Film Company been established in the late Qambar's burnt-out property? Master Mogra and Parizada Gulab, what names!"

As soon as he reached home from the Club, Mr Sarosh rang up his legal adviser. In a few days, he received all the details from Lucknow about Ustad Mogra and company and their claims to the inheritance. Shaikh Elephant-trader left Calcutta, and his advocate in Lucknow presented to the court, the genealogical family tree. Most of the prominent citizens of the city confirmed it.

*

The legal case dragged on. The gift deed presented by Ustad Mogra had no legal validity. The signature of Qambar as Qamar Ali in itself was wrong. It was clear that to calm his hysterical and delirious wife he had forged his signature on stamp paper. The qazi of Chinhat

had also not delivered the original marriage certificate to the qazi of the city. People in villages and hamlets did not consider it necessary to register marriages. The Maulvi Sahib himself had passed away due to old age.

The two copies of the marriage certificate that Raja Raghubir Prasad had delivered to Al Hamdu had been torn and thrown away by Bhola Nath, the thief. When Al Hamdu had gained consciousness at the tea stall in Nanpara, the owner of the stall, Haji Kallu, had taken her back to Imam Ganj. A few months later she, too, passed away.

The marriage certificate had thus been destroyed. Now the search began for reliable witnesses to the wedding.

"The thing is, Abba, half the witnesses have backed out, and the rest have disappeared. The bastards have been bitten by the travel bug and are roaming all over the world," Gulab said to his father. After somehow or the other spending a year in the servants' quarters, the family had returned to their chawl in Nagpada, but the lawyer, in the hope that they would get the property and the film company would be formed in which he would shine as an actor, pursued the legal case with great enthusiasm. Badshah Jani kept looking for witnesses. The entire editorial staff of *Red Rose* had scattered long ago. The village qazi was dead as was Rupa, the maid. Kale Khan, Ikram Ahmad, Ashfaq Ali were untraceable. The young Raja Raghubir Prasad Singh had gone to America for heart surgery and died there. Birdie Chhote Lal too had evaporated. She, along with her family, had migrated to Canada where she married a white man and changed her name. Who was to go looking for her across the seven seas?

It was commonly believed that Qambar Ali had not been legally married to Bela Rani.

The people at Teen Katori House expressed complete ignorance about the matter, nor did they want to get involved in this case. Their manager, Kali Charan Rastogi, was alive but felt that the dubious manner in which the burqa-clad Bela had reached Teen Katori Hotel in Nainital at midnight did not behove a legally-wedded wife.

The court case lasted for more than sixteen years. Mogra, Chameli and Gulab's condition deteriorated from bad to worse. They had travelled constantly to Lucknow for court appearances. Bahar Sahib continued to help them financially. He had now become a lyricist with hit songs to his credit and was quite popular.

*

"That Ganpati seth has trapped even us lame elephants. Jani Bhai, your courts too are like the elephant forest—a magical jungle from which a man cannot escape once he enters," Gulab complained to Badshah Jani who had come to Gulab Bari to wish him goodbye.

The former Red Rose, currently Gulab Bari, was Parizada's Carlton Hotel. Whenever Gulab came from Bombay for court appearances, he stayed in the hut of Sarota, the paan-seller. Gulab had promised all those who lived in the area that he would not only not ask them to vacate the land once he won the case (after all, they were only living on the edges of the compound) but also give them roles in his film. He had even promised some others that he would take them to Bombay and get them jobs. Parizada was therefore popular in this slum.

He had also become friendly with the young mullah, the son of the mullah with whom they had had a fight over the beliefs of Sunnis and Shias on their first day there, eighteen years ago. That mullah had appointed himself as the Imam of the mosque. He had begun first by staying in the mosque and then built himself a room in it. Following him, cowherds, rickshaw-pullers, labourers, and cart-pullers had all settled here.

The mullahji was from Faizabad. The area around the mausoleum of Bahu Begum, the mother of Nawab Asafud Daulah, was called the Gulab Bari. So the mullahji called this settlement Gulab Bari, too. Now even the postman would deliver letters addressed to Gulab Bari. In the large grounds, cattle grazed, and children flew kites. The washerman dried his clothes here, and celebrations would be organised for the birth of the Prophet. At other times, under the peepal tree, there would be story-telling

about Lord Satya Narayan. Like most slums, its population was mixed. It was no different from Gulab's Mahim, and he felt most at home here.

*

Bahar Sahib had bought a flat on Pali Hill. His wife, like the wives of film actors, would organise kitty parties, and his children studied in Panchgani. At film premieres, he would appear in shiny suits. His birthday would be celebrated, and he would get a letter published in Urdu film magazines, saying, "Thanks to my millions of fans for their wishes. This year I celebrated my birthday at home, with just a few friends."

When he had the time, the gentleman would also try to help his less fortunate friends. Bahar Sahib would have hired Gulab as a member of his staff had he not been notorious, illiterate and a jail-bird. Bahar Sahib could have been presented as a witness because he was present at the house in Chinhat, but then he too hadn't known that Bela was getting married on the upper floor. He was a religious man and was not ready to swear a false oath. Now, there was only one person, Chakotra Garhwali, who under some pretext had followed Rupa the maid upstairs. He had never mentioned to anyone whether he had seen the marriage take place. He left the day after the wedding to visit his family in Garhwal. A year-and-a-half later when he heard of the fire, he came to pay a condolence call on Bela's parents in Nagpada. He sat there quietly, resting against a wall, then got up, touched their feet, wished them and climbed down the stairs. Since then he had been untraceable.

7
Mountain God

THE honourable Bahar Phulpuri spent most of his time on the foreign mushaira circuit. This time he had returned after a year and a half. The day after he reached Bombay he went to meet Ustad Mogra at Nagpada. He parked his car below the chawl, excited and happy, eager to give Masterji the good news. First, he looked for Mogra in Mughal's hotel. The son of the obese owner was now at the counter. Instead of a portrait of 'The Light of the Aryans, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi', there hung for some time now, a colour picture of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Jews had disappeared, but the locality was still buzzing. Bahar Sahib then went to the chawl which was now in such a poor state that it seemed it would collapse in the next monsoon. Earlier, when Bahar Sahib came to meet the Mogra family he would come by bus or local train. Now he came in new cars. He too had struggled hard like Ustad Mogra before he became successful. The Ustad had been a master of his art, which was music. In spite of his constant struggle he had stayed a 'harmonium-master'. Bahar Sahib remembered Hannah the Jewish lady who used to sit in her easy chair on the veranda of the chawl muttering, "Su al haz, su al haz—bad luck. Some people have bad luck all their lives and some have good luck." There was a joke popular in Bombay. Indigent Parsis went to Chowpatty beach and offered coconut and flowers to the sea and complained, 'Oh Lord! You have given so much to Tata, why not give us some, too'. Hannah Bai would give Allah Miyan the example of David Sassoon.

But Mogra's daughter had married such a rich man. Whatever happened to that? Damn bad luck.

Bahar Sahib climbed the old stairs and reached the fifth floor. Dirty children were playing on the veranda. Clothes were drying

on clothes lines. Women were cleaning rice. The reed-thin voice of Lata overpowered the atmosphere. Flowers and plants swayed in canisters and Dalda tins. Downstairs, the rubbish thrown into the unused well had now risen to a mound.

Bahar Phulpuri reached Mogra's kholi. A very fair Kutchi Memon woman, wearing a long pink frock and a georgette dupatta, emerged from the room. Inside there was a Frigidaire, a television and flowered linoleum on the floor.

"Mogra Bhai? He went to Mahim. A year ago."

"Did you get this room from him by paying him a premium?"

"A pagdi. Understood?"

"Understood" in the idiom of Bombay had an oceanful of meanings.

"Say, what is the matter?" her husband emerged from the room. "Oh ho! Bahar Sahib, asalamalekum." Bahar Sahib was a famous man who appeared regularly on television and everyone recognised him.

"Yes, I paid him a pagdi which he spent on some case that he is fighting in his hometown. The rest his scoundrel of a son blew up. He bought a jhuggi in Mahim. Gulab Bhai came here once and told me that they had even sold that jhuggi and used the money for the case. Ustad now runs his business from the pavement in Mahalaxmi. All right, excuse me, Bahar Sahib, I have to go to my shop. Salamalekum."

Bahar Sahib went to Mahalaxmi. Mogra was sitting at the gates of the racecourse, under a neem tree. Behind him on the railing hung the sketch of a hand indicating a palmist, and in front of him on a dirty cloth were some caged red munias and fortune-telling cards. A poor man was sitting on his haunches in front asking Ustad about his future.

Tears came to Bahar Sahib's eyes. Mogra saw him and addressed him, "May you live long, Miyan. Where did you disappear?" He had become very old and gaunt.

"If you bet on horses, don't come near me because I also predict the outcome of the races."

Ustad was a bhand from Nakkhas. Even in this pitiable state, he hadn't lost his sense of humour.

"Where is Chameli Khala? And Gulab?"

"Chameli Begum is doing business close by."

"Where?"

"At the shrine of Haji Ali. She is hawking kababs and parathas there. Gulab is busy in his mysterious dealings. He comes sometimes and takes money from us for his needs. However, he regularly goes to Lucknow for court hearings. We have very few hopes of winning the case."

"Ustad, I have brought some good news for you. I have found the only reliable witness for this case, who has been in hiding for twenty-five years."

"Who? Chakotra Garhwali?"

"Yes, Janab! I met a poet from Bandra at a mushaira in Oslo who told me that your case had yet not been decided and that you were facing severe difficulties!"

"And, my bhai, where is this Oslo?"

"Norway."

"The home of Noah Narvi?" [Noah of the water]

Bahar Sahib laughed uproariously. "Once in Phulpur a gentleman, on hearing the nom de plume Noah Narvi, commented, 'Oh, so now Urdu poetry is being written in Norway? Look at the ways of the world; there is Urdu poetry in Norway!' So, Masterji, as it happened, I had to go straight to Toronto from Oslo. I attended mushairas in twenty-five Canadian and American cities. I had to attend these otherwise I would have returned earlier. Then I went to Los Angeles."

"Sit down, Bahar Miyan," Mogra interrupted him. Oslo, Toronto, Los Angeles were strange words for him. Bahar Sahib was reeling them off as if they were Sarsi, Sambhal, Safipur, Leharpur. Once, under the banyan in the film studio, after reading his palm, Mogra had said, "Bahar Miyan, you will have a lot of money, but travels across the ocean are not in your fate."

"Anyway, the lines of fortune keep changing. Perhaps mine is

changing, too, if we have found Chakotra Garhwali," Ustad made a fist out of his hand.

Bahar Sahib could not have sat on the pavement. He said, "Come, let's go to some hotel and have tea."

Mogra hung up the cage with the birds which could foretell fate, on the branch of a tree. The fortune cards he put in a box and called out to a cobbler sitting close by to keep an eye on them.

Bahar Sahib stopped the car in front of the Sheraton at Nariman Point.

"Look at what I look like—will the doorman let me in?"

"How dare anyone stop my guest!"

"Why should I forget my station in life for half an hour? Let's go to the Irani Hotel."

Bahar Sahib, given his current international fame, couldn't just go to any ordinary hotel. He suggested the beach. The two of them sat on a bench on Marine Drive. The burning red sun was about to slip into the water, and a cool breeze was blowing. Mogra thanked God for the pleasant weather. A bhelpuri seller passed by.

Mogra looked inquiringly at Bahar Sahib. Cleared his throat and asked, "Given your international stature will Mr Phulpuri eat bhelpuri?"

Bahar Sahib was embarrassed. He called out to the vendor and said, "Ustad, as it happened I was reciting at the mushaira in Los Angeles. I had drawn a crowd of Indians and Pakistanis, and in the adjoining hall, a sadhu had collected a group of white people. I got a glimpse of the Swamiji, and he looked like Chakotra Garhwali. It was difficult to approach him because his white bodyguards blocked the door. I had to rush to the airport as soon as I finished reciting my ghazal otherwise I would have missed my flight to Philadelphia—

"Anyway. I immediately made inquiries about Swamiji.

"He is a well-regarded person and is known as the Mountain God. But he has taken a vow of silence and communicates only through writing. That, too, very rarely. Even at the meeting in the hotel, his white secretary was reading out what he wrote to his white disciples. I ran from the mushaira to his secretariat and said I was a

very old disciple of his, that in India we had done mystical exercises together for years. Since Swamiji was going back to Bombay in ten days, I wanted an audience with him there. A secretary checked on the computer and gave me an appointment. Two weeks from now, Bombay, date, time, the place where he will be staying. I came back from America day before yesterday and looked for you today. Now, after meeting the Mountain God, I will inform you. Or you can come along."

"No, you go first. Test the water."

"Ustad, I've been flowing with the current, seeing the world as a result!"

A Parsi couple walked past holding their dog's leash.

A short distance away, at the Sheraton, the inaugural function of some Hindi film was being held.

"Sanobar Film Company!" Mogra sighed deeply.

Bahar Sahib ate the bhelpuri, threw the empty leaf-cup under the bench, and said, "At a mushaira in Karachi Gymkhana I heard a couplet:

Only one story of the night, one continuous tale
One small lamp is alight, one small lamp extinguished.

This story will go on. One day in Oslo, looking for some diversion, I got on to a mountain train. I walked inside the train, reached the engine car and discovered that the driver was a Pakistani exile. From Sialkot. He was taking the train through the pine forests towards the tip of the mountain. He was quiet, sad. I came back to my seat next to a window. The train was empty, passing through green, lush hills. Suddenly I remembered the monsoon and the train in which I had met all of you for the first time. I had come from Allahabad and you were coming from Lucknow. Seeing the Sialkoti driver in the unfamiliar, lonely hills of Norway I thought of the strange places man has to go to feed himself. We had only gone from Phulpur and Nakkhas to Bombay. I was hungry and Chameli Khala fed me kabab-parathas."

"Arrey, Ustad," Bahar Sahib snapped his fingers, "Inshallah,

consider this case won. I will have a restaurant opened for you in Los Angeles—Chameli Khala's Kabab-Parathas. The era of nouveau cuisine in the new world. Believe me, just as these days Englishmen in London are having their fill of samosas and tikkas, kabab-parathas will become common in every American home. By Allah's grace, I have many fans in North America, clients so to speak, mashallah! All very wealthy. One of them will become your business partner and, inshallah, two years from now, the same month, day and time, we will be sitting on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Behind us, like this Oberoi Sheraton, your Mogra e Hilton will be glittering and its restaurant—AUNT JASMINE'S COTTAGE KEBABS. Don't laugh, it's not a fantasy! I know two Asian tycoons who are strutting around in the West. The mother of one, before Partition, would go from house to house in Delhi sewing clothes, and the father of the other was an ordinary government employee." He stood up in excitement. And like the messenger in Chinese opera he announced, "Tomorrow I'm going to Samundar Mahal built on Sagar Parbat (Mount Kailash) and will bring the celestial message from the Mountain God."

*

"Ustad, you might recall that Chakotra came to Nagpada to condole with you on Gul e Abbas's death. A few days later, I ran into him in Jamalistan Studio. He said he was going on a pilgrimage to Badrinath. I said, you have just come from Garhwal and you are going back again? There this child of the mountain discovered his Self and renounced the world. Wearing a tiger-skin, his dreadlocks in a bun and with a necklace of rudraksha seeds, he was sitting on a rock at Badrinath when a group of white ascetics passed his way. They took him to be a manifestation of Shiva. Took him abroad with them, and he has been there since. He is now called the Mountain God. He left Bombay as Chakotra Garhwali and returned from Uttarakhand as a god. Abroad, books have been written about him in English, German, French. Here, he is staying in a very nice flat on Napean Sea Road. When I went to the flat, a white woman

in a saffron sari was sitting, waiting at the reception desk. In front of her was a card with her name on it—Ma Ambavati. She wished me good morning and asked me to speak to Ma Parvati. I looked around and saw that Ma Parvati was a big-built lady. She looked Norwegian or German. She was ensconced next to the phone in the gallery. She was reading *He Comes Down the Mountain When He Comes.* This book about Miyan Chakotra has sold millions of copies in the West."

"Bahar Sahib, can't you hurry up a bit?" Ustad interrupted him impatiently. Bahar Sahib had wanted to expand the narration with as much detail as possible so that he could mentally prepare the old harmonium-master. Taking a puff of his cigarette he began, "This Ma Parvati irritated me. Instead of using the first person singular she would say 'this body', or 'this being'. I found out that the Mountain God, before he stopped speaking, would refer to himself as 'this body' instead of 'I'. I asked the disciple if I could get an audience with God, and she said, this body does not know.

"I said, Madam, my appointment was fixed in Los Angeles. She said, fine, but it's ten-thirty right now and your appointment is fixed for eleven. In this interval you could suffer a heart failure or there could be an earthquake. Or the Mountain God himself might abandon his body, who knows?

"I was furious, but reminded myself that I had come to get Chakotraji's testimony regarding the late Bela's marriage. Did Bela or her husband know a few seconds before it happened that such a fierce fire was about to break out and that both would die in it? Forgive me, Ustad."

"Doesn't matter. Carry on."

"I said to this disciple that your brain might not know it, but right now your hand is on the intercom and can contact Maharajji's room.

"She said the hand is not mine, it is an illusion.

"I thought to myself, since the gentleman doesn't speak, only communicates through writing, is there any point in meeting him?

"Right then, a journalist showed up. He was very surprised to

see me and asked, Bahar Sahib, are you too caught up in this scam?

"Chakotra never gave interviews, only his white disciples spoke to the press. The journalist therefore began his interview with Ma Parvati. He asked, where are you from? She said, from nowhere.

"A bell rang and a dhoti-clad white man emerged and gestured to me. I went in. Chakotraji was sitting on a deerskin and behind him was a large picture of Shivji. A white secretary was sitting at some distance. I noticed that unlike other Indian swamis with followings in the West, he lived very simply. I said—I am an old friend of yours. I want to speak to you in complete privacy. Could you please write your answers on your slate in Hindi and give them directly to me and not bother this lady.

"God smiled kindly. He gestured to the blonde girl to leave and she went.

"I said, Bhagwan Sahib, when you used to play the flute and sell balloons at the Andheri railway station, Master Mogra spotted your talent for comedy and buffoonery and included you in his troupe. You were called Manohar, the flute-player. Chakotra Garhwali, your film-name, was suggested by humble me. Nod your head to say yes.

"He bent his head in agreement. I said, now that God has made you into a god, help your old friends. I gave him all the details of the case from start to finish. In response he wrote on the slate—The news of this horrifying fire alienated my heart from this world. I immediately went to Badrinath and renounced it. I am now indifferent to the high and low tides of this ocean of life.

"I said that the elephant-trader has claimed that Bela was never married to Qambar Ali. You are the only witness to this union. Because you are an international personality and a very popular holy figure in the West, your statement will be taken to be the truth. Thanks to Allah's blessings a few people know me but I am only referred to as the 'Nightingale of Poetry' or the 'Colourful Lily'. Mashallah, you have become God, though I am not going to tell anyone that you once acted in C grade movies as Chakotra Garhwali.

"He wrote on the slate—What's the harm even if you tell them? Valmiki too was a dacoit.

"I replied, Chakotra Bhai, the land is now worth fifty lakhs. Soon it is going to be one crore. With just your testimony, Masterji can win the case.

"In response he wrote—There is no strength in this case, forget about it. Nothing in this world has any power. Leave this web of illusion. Sister Bela's frightening tragedy made me an ascetic. And for the last ten years I have taken a vow of silence. Masterji's real favour to me is that his daughter's death showed me the way to God. Om Shanti—Shanti—Shanti.

"He pushed the slate in front of me—I kept insisting. I said, Guru Maharaj, at least you can tell the court that you saw the marriage take place because you were the only member of the troupe who had sneaked upstairs. We were in the portico, listening to Alha and Udal. I saw you climb the stairs.

"He shook his dreadlocks and wrote—I remember everything. Raja Raghubhir Prasad Singh had invited our Sanobar Company to present a scene from *Inder Sabha* at his garden-house. After listening to the Alha for some time I went to change for my role as the Black Devil. By then I had become suspicious of the mysterious atmosphere in the house and wondered if some other game was being played behind the façade of Miyan Amanat (Ali). So, when Bela didn't reappear for a long time, I went upstairs to check. I saw Bela and Qambar Ali in a room. They were arguing and she was insisting that he gift the house-orchard to her. To me it seemed the usual conflict involving gold, land and woman. I told myself, run, and I came down immediately. 'Colourful Lily' Bahar Sahib, I did not see the marriage take place. I am a holy man, truthful and committed to what is right. How can I swear to a false statement? Why would I put my hand on the Gita and take an oath? Om namoh Shivah!"

8
Qasr e Shirin
Shirin Castle

Parvez Mirza, alias Pinky Miyan, the senior partner of 'Parvez and Farhad, Architects and Builders', sat on the carpet in the drawing-room of his junior partner Farhad Dhondy, alias Filly's old, double-storeyed Shirin Castle, with a blueprint spread out in front of him. He was wondering how to incorporate the motif of a rose in the proposed high-rise building—the Rose House. To draw inspiration from nature he looked out of the open door, but all he saw was the little grave of the 'Dog-Fairy' and a rude, crude crow squatting on it. The winged marble statue of Fifi, the poodle, was now covered by a duranta bush.

Fifi was a reminder of the French who had lived here before the Mutiny. They had become fond of cock-fights but love for their mother country had made them name their home Chateau Margo. The people of the city had changed Chateau Margo into Firangi Chatta—the hive of the foreigners, and Fifi's winged statue was now called 'Dog-Fairy'.

When the British took over, fire-worshippers settled in the Dog-Fairy Kothi. These Parsis could have been characters straight out of Firdausi's Shahnamah—Nariman, Zal, Nausherwan, Rustom. These honest, able, liquor traders were very proud of their Magian, French style chateau. But when Nausherwan Dhondy married Shirin Bai, the daughter of a baronet from Pali Hill, Bombay, he gifted the chateau to her and renamed it. He had Shirin Castle and Qasr e Shirin engraved in English and Urdu on a marble slab and fixed on the gate. Ivy covered the sign now. Below it, in Hindi, someone had scribbled Shirin Castle with charcoal.

This family now consisted of only three individuals—Manek Bai, Framroze and Mehnaz. Hence, Parvez and Farhad had set up their office in what had once been the card room of the French, on the upper floor.

At this moment, in the drawing-room downstairs, the two architects were sitting with the blueprint on the wooden floor. Pinky Miyan who was engrossed in it was unaware that, on a similar bright afternoon twenty-seven years earlier, had he not mischievously broken Chandni Begum's spectacles, he would not have been busy planning a ten-storeyed Red Rose House today, made of concrete, steel and glass on the grounds of Red Rose Garden for its new owner, the elephant-trader, Shaikh Tahir Ali.

Destiny.

Apart from Pinky and Fali in the drawing-room, there were other people who had no connection with architecture. Pinky's cousin, Dinky, was wearing his national costume, a lilac shalwar-qameez, and thus looked a bit different from the others. He was talking to the other guest from abroad, Fali's American passport holding mamu, Mr Keki Lal Kaka. Pinky's younger sister Amina was sitting on a rocking-chair, knitting a sweater.

On the Cleopatra couch, his khala, Safia Sultan, was quizzing Fali's mother, Mrs Manek Bai Dhondy, about the recipe for dhansak which she was finding difficult to grasp.

Rustomji Nausherwanji Dadabhoy Dhondy's only son, Framroze, who was known as Fali, had been in Pinky Miyan's class right from Sherwood School in Nainital to Columbia University. He had abandoned his ancestral business of liquor trading and turned to architecture. He and Pinky had returned home after acquiring distinguished degrees and over the last few years, their firm was now second only to the city's leading construction company, Muhammad Maruf Builders.

On the upper floor of Teen Katori House, Safia Sultan ran her St. Sofia Convent. On the ground floor lived Vicky Miyan with his current wife (who was the granddaughter of the late Ilaichi Khanum Atu) and his four children. Pinky's barrister sister,

Shehla, also had her office in the same house. Hence Pinky had made the sprawling Shirin Castle his place of work and planned to reserve one floor of the proposed Rose House exclusively for his firm.

"'Parvez and Farhad Architects—Shirin Castle'. Excellent."

Dinky looked at the letterhead printed in English, Hindi and Urdu and complimented them.

"This was our Dil Bahar Bua's idea," Fali said, looking up from the blueprint. "Mirza and Dhondy, she said, sounds inappropriate. There has to be a Farhad in Shireen Castle."

"Dil Bahar Bua has been brought up on the culture of fairy tales," Pinky said. "I told Shehla Appi to have Farhad legally added to Fali's name so now he, like some royal European great-grandson of Queen Victoria, has a name that is one yard long—Farhad Framroze Rustomji Din Yar Dhondy! The firm has been registered as Parvez and Farhad. Discriminating people of taste are delighted."

"How many refined people are there left in this city?" asked Dinky sarcastically.

"You'd be surprised how many. Talk to any vegetable vendor or rickshaw-puller, and you will know. The manners and witticism of the people here are cited as examples," Pinky was now excited. "I remember Siraj and Salik. They sat in a tea shop in Nakkhas and a crowd collected around them. The educated would go to them with literary questions. Vicky Mamu, who was not all there in those days, once took me with him. He asked Siraj Sahib which poet had written a particular couplet.

Keep every thorn sharpened in this wilderness of passion
Perhaps someone with blistered feet might follow me.

No one other than Mir could have written it, Siraj Sahib said. Literature was celebrated in every locality with mushairas. Vegetable-sellers, embroiderers, masons, gathered at paan shops after dinner and decided on one subject, say a flower or prison. They would then recite one good couplet after another on the same theme, off the cuff."

"Speak for yourself. You don't even know how to read Urdu," Dinky threw another barb.

Pinky's face fell. "Yes, do consider me the same as the unlettered vegetable-sellers," he said, hurt. "But then, Dinky, how much Urdu do *you* read?"

"It's a communal problem," Fali said. "This is the trouble with the Hindi belt. Things are different in the south."

"South Indians are comparatively more progressive and are surprised when they see us grappling with these issues. Dinky, do you remember Chandni Baji?" Amina asked.

"Yes, I remember Chandni Baji. She was fair and looked Nepali. She was always sewing Ammi's clothes. In fact, Ammi had planned to take her to America as Feroza's ayah."

"A few days after you left, Ammi asked her to teach Pinky Urdu. But where did Pinky have time from his tomfoolery? She, poor thing, was burnt to ashes, too."

"If there had been no fire in Red Rose, Pinky wouldn't be playing around with these plans now," Safia said, speaking for the first time and pointing to the blueprint. Her tone was scary.

Pinky bent to look at the blue paper once again. A contrite silence fell on the room.

"When I see Chhoti Khala, I'm reminded of Mrs Abdul Qadir's stories—*The City of Corpses and other Horrifying Tales, And the Song of Death* or *The Death of Count Ilyas*, by Miss Hijab Ismail," Amina whispered to Dinky.

"Who were they?" Dinky asked her softly.

"Who?"

"Mrs Abdul Qadir and Miss Hijab Ismail?"

"Oh ho, Dinky Winky! But we shouldn't be using such morbid examples for Chhoti Khala." As if in penitence, she went and sat close to Safia.

Dinky threw his head back and examined the room. He was in the drawing-room of Shirin Castle after a long time. Instead of being emotional he was surprised at how nothing had changed in this house since the time he used to come as a child with his mother,

Parveen Sultan, from Pakistan to visit his Nana and Nani, and came here with Shehla, Pinky and Amina, the children of his older aunt Zarina, to play with Fali and Mehnaz. Above the fireplace, portraits of Shirin Bai Dhondy and Rhoda Bai Engineer still hung at the same angle. On the wall, the young Shah of Iran, along with his Queen Soraya, was still on display though even his next Queen, Farah Diba, had come and gone. And the Aryamehr himself had descended from the Persian throne and joined his imaginary ancestors, Kaikaus and Jamshed. Dinky was envious at how loyal Manek Bai was—faithful to the point of devotion. Manek Bai herself hadn't aged. Her heir, the fortunate Framroze alias Fali, however, had begun to bald.

Similarly, Dinky Miyan had noticed that there were still tinned copper water warmers in the bathrooms of his grandparents' Teen Katori House. In the toshakhana, he had seen gold lace-trimmed half-sleeved waistcoats with bodices, ghuraswa pyjamas, angarkhas and achkans made of jamawar. Yesterday, Dinky had suggested to his older aunt Zarina that such stuff, if sold as rarities, would make them a lot of money at which the venerable lady had become furious.

Mrs Manek Bai Dhondy went out, calling out to Dil Bahar Bua. She, like most Parsis and Bohras, pronounced D and T as hard consonants. Her children's pronunciation of not just Sh and Q, but also of the hard T, was perfect.

Dinky asked Mr Lal Kaka for permission to light a cigarette, and offered one to his Chhoti Khala. Offended, she shook her head. Mrs Dhondy returned.

"All of you haven't changed a bit," Dinky said.

"And I cannot hide my surprise at how much *you* have changed," Mrs Dhondy said. "And in this dress you look like a Kabuliwala."

"Oh ho, Mummy," Fali raised his head from the blueprint and looked at Dinky apologetically.

Dinky suppressed his irritation and said affectionately to Pinky, "I'm very happy at the success of your firm." Then he turned to his younger aunt, Safia. As usual, she was somewhere else.

Safia was staring at the portraits of Fali's grandmother, Shirin Bai, and his aunt, Rhoda Bai. A young Parsi lady, her hair done

in Albert fashion stood delicately against one of the pillars of this very room. The other young Parsi girl, her hair teased into a puff, wearing a gown, reclined on this very same Cleopatra couch. Mrs Dhondy used to say that an English photographer in Hazratganj had kept the famous painting of Madame Recamier by (Jacque-Louis) David in mind when he took this picture of her late sister-in-law, Rhoda Bai, 1936.

Shirin Bai, Rhoda Bai, get off the mantelpiece and come back to this Cleopatra couch, please come back.

According to Manek Bai, this sort of traffic was not impossible. She belonged to a famous theosophist family from Malabar Hill, Bombay. Her grandmother, Tehmina Bai, knew Sir Dinshaw Petit's theosophist daughter, Ruttie Bai. Mrs Dhondy now, like many Parsis, had become a pantheist. Along with Sai Baba of Shirdi and Meher Baba of Poona, she was devoted to all the god men of the world. She was a disciple of Baba Neem Chameli of Balaganj who lived in a small tree house he had built in a banyan tree, and whose followers claimed he was a hundred and twenty years old but looked only fifty.

Dil Bahar Bua brought in a tea-tray and put it on a table.

"Fenny Bitiya, you honour us," Manek Bai said to Safia.

Safia Sultan was used to Manek Bai's priceless Urdu, but she was now confused—oh ho, she was translating 'do the honours'.

"A bit of tea!" Pinky smiled and said to Safia, speaking in Mrs Dhondy's style. "Oh Manek Khala, where are you going?"

Often, when all the siblings were playing, Mrs Manek Bai would drive herself into the gates of Teen Katori House in her little tum-tum carriage, drawn by an equally tiny horse. From the portico, Sona Kali would call out, "Amy Bitiya, your Manek Khala has come." Ever since then they had referred to Manek Bai as Manek Khala. There was an innocent affection latent in khala as well as an elegant honouring of tradition. Mrs Dhondy's traditionalism consisted of sticking to her anglicised Urdu as it was. According to Mrs Dhondy, when the Englishmen came upon Lucknow after the Sepoy fight, her grandfather-in-law arrived from Bombay to give

those people liquor. When Manek Bai married Rustomji in front of the Fire of Victory and came over to this side, she made a concession to her Urdu-speaking in-laws, speaking Urdu by literally translating English phrases, constructs and idioms into Urdu.

She came back into the room, offered everyone layered samosas and said, "I'm hoping, Dinky baby, that you are acting well in Pakistan," meaning 'doing well'.

"Yes, Manek Khala."

"And your sweet father?"

"He, too, is back in Karachi now."

"How excellent," Mrs Dhondy said sitting down, satisfied.

Yesterday, Zarina Sultan had said to this old, loyal family friend, "Pinky is getting old. After so many years, Feroza, all grown up now, mashallah, has come back and he likes her and wants to marry her. Find out from Dinky Miyan if he will accept this offer for his sister. I know that his word counts as law in their family."

"Why doesn't Pinky himself ask Feroza?"

"You know, Manek Bai, in our family it is not the tradition to speak to the girl directly. Will you ask Dinky, please?"

Mrs Dhondy brought the Egyptian pouffe with Nefertiti's profile on it over and sat close to Dinky. She said to him softly. "Poor Bobby's first marriage went on to the cliffs. The other too leaves a lot for hope. But your Uncle Vicky's second marriage is going well. Now our Pinky is saying if his cousin Feroza would come here."

"Here, where?" Dinky said, alarmed.

"Here, on this side."

"Owoo—impossible, Khala."

"Why? Yes, it's true that Feroza has grown up in Karachi, London, Paris. How will she be able to live in Lucknow? But...."

"It is not that, Manek Khala. But—but—their attitudes, lifestyle, viewpoints have become so different."

"Is that so?"

"Apart from that, she has decided to marry a young Englishman."

"Dinky, you people don't approve of your blood relative but an English lad is all right?"

"He will convert to Islam and they will have a nikah. He has agreed to this."

"That I understand." Manek Bai pursed her lips. Dinky didn't get the meaningfulness of the Bombay word 'understand'.

"Oyee..." Safia Sultan screamed, jumped up from the couch and ran out. Alarmed, Dinky stood up. A lizard had crawled out from behind the portrait of the Shah of Iran and crept behind the portrait of Queen Elizabeth. From the veranda Safia screamed, "Pinky, Dinky, Fali, what are all of you doing? Kill it, get rid of it!"

Dinky followed her out of the room. Chhoti Khala had always been melancholic. Now she was properly crazy.

She was standing under the hanging plants in the veranda completely unnerved.

"Chhoti Khala, I have seen flying lizards in New Guinea. And these huge iguanas...."

"Please, kill it...."

"There is so much furniture stuffed in Manek Khala's drawing-room. This house must be full of lizards. How many can we kill and how will we find them among all this stuff? When things become old, all sorts of creatures start living in them."

"You have become anti-culture. Don't argue with me! And as far as these creatures are concerned, Batashan Bua used to say that lizards are jinns and that is why I am afraid of them. And remember Dinky, the only reason I fear dying is that there will be lizards in the grave."

"I am sorry, Chhoti Khala." Dinky gently put a hand on her shoulder and brought her back into the room.

Mrs Dhondy lit lamps in front of Mahatma Buddha, went through the French windows and started her Zoroastrian prayer to the setting sun. Pinky, Fali, Amina and Mr Lal Kaka went out for a walk in the garden. The room became silent.

Tick, tick, tick—the ancient grandfather clock.

Khut, khut, khut—outside the window—khut, khut, khut.

Khit, khit, khit—footsteps on the old wooden staircase.

Diamond-shaped light which filtered onto the floor, dispersed through the coloured glasses of the windows, disappeared.

The voice from within that had bothered Safia for many years reappeared after a long time and said, *Adabarz.* She turned pale and sat still as a statue. The voice had been silent for many months, and now it had suddenly reminded her of its existence. After a few minutes, it whispered, *Has she fallen*?

Dinky came and sat close to Safia. "Chhoti Khala, why do you consider me anti-culture?"

"Hain...?" She gave a start. Then she spoke excitedly. "Look at these Parsis. All over the world, their numbers have declined till they are lower than the circulation of the *Illustrated Weekly of India.* But they have kept their distinctiveness intact."

Dinky kept quiet. Why do these people want to drag us into their efforts to stick together? They want Feroza to marry Pinky and me to marry Vicky Mamu's daughter and take her with me to Pakistan. Why? Only because we are relatives? Dinky realised that their visas were about to run out and that his mother, Parveen Sultan, though busy buying clothes, wasn't getting any blouses stitched this time. Now she and Feroza wore stylish shalwar-qameez ensembles which could pass off as French apparel. "We have our own national identity," Feroza had said proudly to Amina. How can she now marry Pinky and settle down here? It was out of the question. She would have to face a great deal of mental and cultural conflict. But then, when she lived in England as Mrs Brian Moreland, wouldn't she face cultural...anyway, that was her problem, why should it bother me? I will do what I think is best for me. "Identity and Distinctiveness is your big problem," Pinky said. "We continue to wear what we always did. There has been no mind-blowing revolution in our way of life."

"Broad-bottomed pyjamas and two piece caps for men, eh? Ha ha!"

"Will politics dictate clothing now?"

"Why not? Ataturk made his people into Europeans. Khomeini hid women again. Even your khadi was connected to politics, and all Chinese wear blue tunics."

"Yaar, Ammi has very lovingly had a sherwani and churidar pyjama made for you. If only to please her...."

"Sure, I'll wear it as I would a fancy dress." Immediately, he regretted what he had said. He should not have responded so harshly.

Another point came to his mind. "Pinky, identity for you too has become a way of conduct. Any young man you see has a beard. And there are burqas upon burqas...."

Both of them scored a point over each other and smiled.

Fali's younger sister, chartered accountant Mehnaz Dhondy, brought her car to a stop right under the window, blew the horn and called out as she always did, "Hello, Ding Dong Dinky!"

Every three years, the one and a half months of our childhood that we spent together in Lucknow is our common treasure, and it shouldn't be ruined, thought Dinky. Amina's voice came from the garden. "Hi, Mehnaz—let's take Dinky Winky out for taftaans and reshmi kababs. And Kashmiri tea, to wash it down."

Mehnaz came into the room. Mrs Dhondy asked, "Have you done Pinky, Fali's account—He rang your bell many times. First, go and wash your mouth—you are not looking like anything on the ground."

Mehnaz understood. Do your face first. You are looking like nothing on earth. Laughing, she ran towards her room. Dil Bahar Bua was approaching from the other direction. She ran into a stool and fell.

The voice had asked, *has she fallen*? When something untoward was about to happen, the voice would warn Safia in advance. Now it was telling her even about ordinary events. She sat there petrified.

Shirin Bai, Rhoda Bai were smiling. If not vultures, then lizards.

As they walked, happy and chattering, towards the car, Amina called out, "Chhoti Khala, come with us. We have to pick up Feroza from Chhote Mamu's."

"Water was dripping from the hanging pots and a drop splashed on my hand. Let me do my ablution first."

"She has become obsessive about ablution," Amina murmured to Dinky.

"Mummy, come on!" roared Fali.

"No, baba log—you go and make yourself happy, I have to go to Cup House. I will go with Safia."

Manek Bai Dhondy had always called Teen Katori House, Cup House.

9
Bohemian Girl

AFTER picking up Feroza from Bobby Miyan's house they were going towards Tehsin Masjid to buy sheermals. They passed Kashmiri Mohalla and Pinky said to his cousin Dinky, "The Kashmiris say that the tea made here isn't Kashmiri tea at all; it's not even tea but a curry, they feel."

"My dear friend Brian Moreland," said Feroza casually, "likes green tea as well as lots of mango pickle."

This was directed at Pinky who responded solemnly. "The English now seem to be sold on samosas and tandoori chicken."

The next morning Feroza and Dinky went for the day to the house of their younger uncle, Bobby, who now lived with his third wife at Chiraiya Jheel. Shehla left for the high court. Pinky went to the site of Red Rose House. His married sister Amina who had come from Bombay to meet their Pakistani relatives, stayed home to look after her children. On the third day too Feroza went to Bobby Miyan's for the day. On the morning of the fourth day, she went out shopping with Vicky Miyan's daughter, Salima. Then she went over to Bobby Miyan's again.

Vicky Miyan's wife, Bahar Ara Begum, took out the keys of the toshakhana.

The previous week, her older sister-in-law, Zarina, had ordered her to put the clothes out to sun for, Allah willing, Pinky would soon be a groom.

Rani Dulhan was not aware that two evenings previously Mrs Dhondy had come from Shirin Castle and, like a parrot, fired a cannon: Feroza was going to marry an Englishman.

Ilaichi Khanum's granddaughter, the former Gulshan Khanum,

was now Rani Bahar Ara Begum alias Rani Dulhan. She did not count for anything in the family and was not informed about this development. She now called out to Sona Kali and Nuran to take out the bundles of heavy, expensive clothes, wrapped in unbleached cotton, from the trunks and spread them out to air on divans in the back veranda. After sweeping the courtyard, old Angoori came and sat on the stairs and began recalling stories of earlier weddings.

"Will you go and call older Bitiya and Penny Baji," Rani Dulhan said to Nuran.

Zarina Sultan was unhappy at the unbecoming behaviour of her middle sister Parveen and her niece, Feroza, and unlike Pinky, had made no attempt to hide her disappointment. Why should she? One complains only to one's own. She came out and sat down on the divan, disinterestedly turning the clothes over.

Parveen emerged from her room, sat on a chair and began examining the clothes. "This stuff is from the time of Mother Eve! At home, we wear our clothes three or four times, then wrap them up in bundles and leave them at the gate for anyone who wants them. Or we bring them over to India for our poor relatives."

Zarina looked at her sister. "Parveen, you have also started talking like this! Sad."

Slightly embarrassed, Parveen stroked a dupatta on which flowers had been embroidered in silver and gold.

"Pinky Miyan's gifts for his wife are still not ready," Rani Dulhan informed her with alacrity. Parveen was even more embarrassed, for these gifts were meant for her daughter. To change the subject, she said, "What matchless work, looks like enamel! Where else but in Lucknow will you find this? A suit comparable to this would cost us Rs.15,000. Here it must have cost four or five. Craftsmanship is so cheap here because of poverty."

Zarina kept quiet. Parveen thought she had said something wrong again. She turned to her sister-in-law, "Arrey Dulhan Bhabhi, this is a beautiful gharara! Get a similar one made for Shehla's wedding."

Bahar Ara Begum rarely took part in conversations. She was

usually stupefied by her resident sister-in-law. Softly she said, "For Barrister Sahib? Let her agree to get married first."

"She'll marry some Hindu," Parveen pursed her lips and murmured, but Zarina heard her and was furious. Angrily, she retaliated. "Parveen, is it you who is saying this now? Remember how you sat right here and complained to our late Amma about how people in Pakistan talked about Muslim girls here getting married to Hindus? When you went there as a new bride, you were shocked at how they exaggerated things. I'm surprised that you have changed so much, Penny."

Poor Rani Dulhan, nervous at the impending battle between her venerable sisters-in-law, got up and slipped away towards the kitchen.

Inflamed, Zarina kept talking. "You have no idea what happened at first when respectable families migrated, and what decent girls had to face when prospects of suitable matches for them disappeared."

"I'm fed up of listening to this lament. Should people have stayed here to starve?"

"Not everyone was starving. More than half the service gentry migrated, too. I have no complaints against anyone. After 1857, Mughal princesses had to marry bakery and stable hands. I have seen for myself how after 1947 tailors and weavers became the sons-in-law of respectable families."

"There is no caste system in Islam. In the Arab world tailors and butchers till today proudly add to their name...."

"Oh ho, since when have you become so democratic? Go to the small towns and see how the unmarried daughters of respectable families have grown old guarding the honour of their ancestors. They end up teaching in schools."

"One such daughter of a respectable family who was in trouble came to your home, too. What did all of you do to her?"

"What! What did I do? I wanted to make her my sister-in-law, but you and Bobby together sabotaged that."

"Bajiya, in your heart you too didn't want that match."

"Why wouldn't I have wanted it?"

"If Vicky didn't have a family of his own, he would have left his

property to your children. He would have made Pinky his heir."

"Tauba, tauba, tauba. Parveen, fear God at least."

"As for my opposition to that match with Chandni, I wasn't old enough then to understand these matters in all their complexity."

"You still don't understand anything."

"Thank you. I accept that. I did not know that Vicky had come to like her. We always took him to be half-mad. Nor did that unfortunate tell us anything about herself. Once she mentioned something about the jamawar shamiana of her grandfather's but I snubbed her and told her not to fib. After that, she remained silent all the time. Till today I don't know, and nor did any of you make any attempts to find out, who she was. Poor thing, burnt to ashes unnecessarily. And Bajiya, with age, and having seen the world I have become wiser. Do you remember that I had wanted to take her to America, but Amma forbade it?"

"All of us, all our lives, hold others responsible for our mistakes and weaknesses. This is our nature."

"Vicky is happy with his wife and children, what else do we want. Poor Chandni wasn't fated to live long."

"Bibi, it's you who brought up this subject. As to what is fated for whom, who knows. Once, when Safia was in school, Amma was buying a Banarsi doshala for her. The shopkeeper urged her saying, Rani Sahib, it will last a long time. Amma answered, Aye woyi, will she use this miserable shawl all her life? The shopkeeper immediately retorted, no, not all her life because Bitiya, after all, will go to her home one day."

"Out of sheer stinginess Safia uses that shawl all the time," Parveen laughed.

Both of them enjoyed being critical of their youngest sister.

"Manjhle Mamu, before he died, sent his bhaat share of Safia's trousseau. That stuff is locked up in the godown. Safia didn't think of giving one single thing from there for Amina's dower."

Zarina returned to the subject they were arguing about. "The days of when there was a scarcity of employed Muslim boys have gone. Parents no longer want to send their daughters over to your

side. All those problems with visas and passports! God forbid if there is a war and the borders are closed, there will be no letters or news. Twice they've had to deal with these unpleasant situations. And it's not as if things are any easier in times of peace. Girls can't reach in time to see their parents alive. Well, after 1971, if the borders on one side closed, those on the other side opened up. Allah doesn't let time stay the same forever." She changed sides and lifted her feet onto the divan. "Penny Begum! There were lots and lots of offers for Safia in spite of her disabled hand."

"Did she never stop mourning for Qambar Ali? How come this one-sided love?" Parveen was determined to hold her own.

"Love? Tauba. To hell with it. Do girls from respectable families fall in love?"

"Bajiya, I know everything. All the offers that came for her through Bobby, all of you rejected because you didn't like Bobby."

"That is untrue! Safia herself announced that that wretched inner voice of hers was forbidding her. Two offers came from Canada, but she said she wouldn't travel in an aeroplane. How could we have arranged a ship for her?" Zarina's face was red with anger. "How dare you taunt Shehla about marrying a Hindu! How many girls over there have married Christians, Jews, Americans, Englishmen? Hmmm?"

"At least they are not kafirs! They may be polytheists, but they are people of the book."

"Is a Muslim woman allowed to marry a person of the book?"

"If they accept Islam."

"And now you are going to get an English son-in-law."

"He will recite the kalima, and there will be a nikah."

"Will he become a Muslim in his heart?"

"Only Allah knows what is in people's hearts."

"You mean you will have it your way, this way or that."

"Well, let it be."

Safia came down and stood at the door, listening to the argument between her older sisters. Softly she said, "Come, let's sit there."

The three reached the side veranda. In front was the small summer house surrounded by kadam trees which had turned yellow in the setting sun. On this very veranda, sitting on these very chairs, in the past, important matches had been made and broken.

From this very place, in the middle of the night, they had seen Red Rose aflame across the river.

Smoke arises across the river, wonder what is happening
Maybe he for whom I've abandoned the world is himself aflame.

So Safia Sultan, how have you been? These normal people are busy with their problems.

Zarina had been seething for three days, and now that she had started, she couldn't stop. "Your daughter has refused to marry Pinky. You didn't agree to Dinky marrying Salima. Parveen, you are as arrogant as our late Amma. It doesn't matter. Mashallah, you are the wife of a wealthy man. Why would you accept Atuji's great-granddaughter as your daughter-in-law? You seem to forget that she is the daughter of Vicky Miyan, the Raja of Teen Katori. Bear in mind that you will not find such a simple cow-like creature anywhere else. She is as harmless as her mother. She is also doing her doctorate."

"You mean a cow with a PhD," Safia added.

Parveen smiled to herself. "What is her subject," she asked Safia.

"Laghar Bhusawali: Life and Works."

Parveen let out a guffaw. Amina peeked in.

"Oh ho, all three of you! Mashallah!

"Yes," Safia answered. "As Bobby says, the three witches of Macbeth."

*

Bobby had dropped Feroza off at the gate. He was angry with his brother and sister and therefore had stopped coming into the house. Feroza, after she declined Pinky's offer, wanted to stay away from the house as much as she could. The older aunt was upset with her and Pinky pretended to be cheerful. Dinky remained silent, for

which she was sorry. Her uncle's wife didn't count for anything. Feroza felt very sympathetic towards her, but then she was leading a life of ease and happiness. She obeyed her resident sister-in-law (who was only two years older than Vicky), served her husband, tended to her children and looked after the house—what more could a woman want? Just look at the state Safia was in. And Shehla, wearing a black gown, arguing in court all day and with clients in the evening. God help us.

"Asalamalekum, Mumanijan," Feroza called out when she reached the veranda.

Clothes were spread out on the divan. Feroza immediately began looking at them with interest.

"Gharara?"

"Yes, it is a gharaswan pyjama. They were worn earlier," Nuran said. "You had to pick up the lower portions and tuck them into your waistbands to be able to walk."

"And what about those that Badi Khala, Mumanijan and others, wear?"

"Chutta pyjama. Khadapaincha! Less flared. Those were worn only by the maids. The owners wore gharaswan pyjamas," Nuran answered.

"What do you mean, owners?"

"People like you, Bitiya, rich people."

"Mumani Dulhan, will you have a gharaswan made for me?"

"Sure. Do you want a fish-backed one? Or a zig-zag border? Or one with triangles? In chatapati?

Feroza was confused. "Something for a typical Indian Muslim wedding."

"You begin with tying a rupee on the arm as an offering to the guardian Imam, then apply turmeric paste on yourself on the eve of the wedding. Then come gifts of clothes and jewellery from the groom for the bride. The bride then dresses up, the parting of her hair is filled. The couple sees each other for the first time in a mirror followed by the sprinkling of water by water-carriers. Outside the Kashmiri bhands let loose their horses...

"Inside the mirasins sing farewell songs under tinsel. Shohdas* go to the groom's house early in the morning and shower him with blessings. If they are not adequately rewarded and sent away, they start abusing, abusing indirectly," Nuran said.

"But suitable abuses," Rani Dulhan added.

"Can you still find such shohdas?"

"Yes, Bitiya, in old Saadatganj," Nuran said.

"Feroza, are you making a film for television?" Rani Dulhan asked.

"People from London Television are thinking about it."

"Anyway, you too are about to get married, to Pinky Miyan, right?"

"No, I'm getting married there."

"Oh ho—all right." Having spent twenty-five years in this family, she had learnt to be diplomatic. "What caste is he? An Indian migrant? Punjabi, Pathan?"

She had been to visit her sister-in-law Parveen Sultan in Karachi and was familiar with the political situation there.

"No."

"Sindhi?"

"No."

"It can't be a Bengali now. All right—a Baloch, then?

"No—an Englishman."

"Eng—lish—" Bahar Ara Begum's mouth fell open and stayed that way.

"I must go, I have to talk to Vicky Mamu regarding something important about my marriage. Let me go look for him." Feroza got up and went into the side veranda. Her mother, both her aunts and Amina had gone in. Nuran went into the baradari and switched on the lights. Vicky, as if he had been waiting for this signal, came out of his library into the veranda. An attendant brought his papers and books out.

*

* A fringe group that played a role at weddings and deaths.

The white-bearded Vicky Miyan usually spent most of his time in the jasmine garden talking to the gardener, gardening or studying botanical treatises. And who knows what else he would read. He had taught himself Sanskrit and Arabic, and if there hadn't been forty thousand characters in the alphabet, he would have learnt Chinese too, because it was the language of Lao Tzu.

He would sit here till late at night as though he was Confucius sitting in a pavilion surrounded by submerged willows, absorbed in philosophical thought.

He went inside and reverentially brought out some volumes of the translation of the Holy Quran.

Feroza tip-toed till she came up close to him. "Asalamalekum, Mamujan."

"Walekum asalam, may you live long. Sit down. Where were you all day?"

"I was at Chhote Mamu's. Then I started looking at clothes that Mumanijan had taken out. Khada pyjama! The upright wide-bottomed pyjama!" She smiled, amused.

"They must all look like fancy dresses to you."

"It's not that, Mamujan. Actually, in this connection, I wanted to ask you for something."

"Ask Bajiya, and take whatever you want. I have also kept some jewellery for you. I will bring your bhaat for you when you...."

"What is bhaat Mamujan? Don't bring rice and lentils to Karachi, people will laugh."

The girl and I are conversing using different idioms. "All right then, what were you saying?"

"Mamujan, the thing is that...."

"Adab, Bade Mamujan. Hello, Ferry."

Pinky was standing in front of them. Glowing. Open-hearted, magnanimous.

How nice he is, but—no—impossible. Anyway, it's out of the question now. An announcement of her engagement had already appeared in the London newspapers.

"Live long, Miyan. Where are you coming from? Faltering and fatigued, rejected and stricken."

Pinky sat down on a cane chair. They talked about the Japanese plants that Vicky had sent for from Sikandar Bagh. Pinky wanted to say something but couldn't muster up the courage. He looked very sad, but Feroza felt this had nothing to do with Brian Moreland. He was concerned about Mamu. How much all of them loved Mamu.

"Mamu Miyan, what are you reading?" they both asked almost simultaneously.

"Hain?" He started. "This is a comparative study of some of the translations and a commentary on a few holy verses. Are you two interested?"

"Yes, yes," his nephew and niece said enthusiastically.

At this moment Feroza found herself bound to her cousin in an unbreakable bond of blood and compassion.

A priceless association—but no—anyway.

Vicky Mamu was saying, "Look at what Maulana Abul Ala Maududi says in the *Tafhimul Quran* about verse 28, chapter 29: 'It is we who created them and we have made their joints strong and when we so wish we can replace them by bringing others like them in their place.' The Maulana says that this sentence can have three meanings. First, whenever we want we can kill them and create other people who are different from them in their conduct. Secondly, whenever we want we can change their appearance, which means just as we can make someone healthy and perfect-bodied, in the same way we can make them disabled, paralysed or afflicted with some other illness. Thirdly, whenever we want we can create them in some other form after death."

"Arrey—isn't this, that? What do you call it...."

"Transmigration," Pinky came to Feroza's aid.

"I don't know what the Maulana meant. But if I voiced the third interpretation, people would beat me up."

"Do you believe in transmigration?" Pinky asked.

"Absolutely not."

The moon had risen.

"Don't read now. This light is dim."

"My eyesight is so good that I can read by moonlight! And to read the Quran by moonlight, what an elegant idea!" He was pleased with his idea, for there were very few who appreciated what he said.

"It's a full moon, the Poonam moon."

"What's Poonam? Poonam Dhillon?"

"Yaar, you are so foolish."

The intimacy and candour of relatives of the same age! Pinky had forgotten that relations between them after Feroza's refusal were supposed to be strained.

The weather, the atmosphere, the environment, the shadows of the night, can be magical.

"Gypsy Moon!" Vicky Miyan looked up and said.

The air brought whiffs of fragrances with it.

"On that chabutra there, Bela had sung, 'the jasmine blooms at midnight'. There was much applause. That night, too, moonlight was scattered all over."

The magic of a full moon.

"In this very baradari, Chandni Baji sat up till midnight to complete my cardigan because we were to leave for America as soon as we arrived in Karachi," Feroza recalled. "Bade Mamu, Ammi tells me that in those days there was talk about you and Chandni Baji—what do you call it, setting the ball rolling. If she hadn't gone to Red Rose she would have been alive."

Yesterday was the full moon, and all night we ... "Yes—you were going to tell me something."

"It's nothing, Mamu Miyan."

"Don't try and fool me."

Pinky vacillated, then spoke hesitantly. "Today I crossed the Dhina Mehri Bridge. I saw a group of eunuchs. They said that after Sulochana's death, his successor Madhubala went to Bombay and that Memsahib had been missing for a while."

"The fault was entirely mine. But you are well aware that when she ran away, I wasn't in my senses."

"How many years has it been since Maggie Mumani fled?

"Thirty years now."

"Then it's unlikely that she will still be alive. If she has now run away from the Salvation Army how must she have borne the hardships of poverty and homelessness?"

"She had been used to that sort of life from childhood."

"Hain?? But Ammi used to say she was the daughter of some English viscount and that you had met her at Charing Cross Station when returning from the University."

"True. But her mother was a gypsy."

"Gypsy? This sounds exactly like the opera *Bohemian Girl* in which gypsies kidnap the daughter of a Bohemian duke from his castle!!"

The moon was shining over the baradari. Moonlight lit up the jasmine and hibiscus grove. Across from them, the house with its turrets looked as if it had been painted on canvas as a backdrop for *The Bohemian Girl.*†

"You were at Charing Cross Station..." Pinky reminded him.

"Yes," Vicky gave a start.

"Was she studying at the university too?"

"She used to stand outside the station and sing."

"Arrey...!" Pinky and Feroza again reacted together.

"Her brother played the accordion. Her crippled mother stood on one side with her crutches holding a basket of wild flowers. When train passengers or other wayfarers dropped coins in the cap, she would offer them a flower."

"But you just said that she was the daughter of a viscount."

"Granddaughter. She was the natural daughter of the dissipated son of some viscount or other. Her mother was a gypsy and stunning looking. She had been a chorus girl in some music hall."

"What happened then?" Now Pinky and Feroza were like

---

† A ballad opera by the Irish composer William Michael Balfe which was first staged in London in 1843 and one of whose numbers became extremely popular.

children who would listen to Nana Miyan telling them stories in this very pavilion.

"One day, returning from class, I reached Charing Cross and saw a sad-faced girl wearing a worn-out raincoat, singing. She was singing an aria from *The Bohemian Girl.*

I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls
With vassals and serfs at my side,
I had riches Too great to count,
And a highest ancestral name
I also dreamt that pleased me most,
That you lov'd me still the same.

"Such a melodious, sonorous voice! It went straight to my heart like an arrow. I put a pound in her brother's cap. Then I began going there often to hear her and asked her to sing the same aria.

"No one spoke to these three because even in Britain gypsies were considered outcasts—pickpockets and petty thieves. In Germany, Hitler sent many poor gypsies to the gas chambers."

"Bade Mamu, I'm sorry for interrupting. These days in Paris gypsy girls from Yugoslavia are roaming around stealing and shoplifting. Were these people also Muslims from Yugoslavia?" Feroza asked.

"No, they were British. Probably Irish."

"You fell in love with Maggie?"

"Arrey, not at all, I only felt sorry for her. So I took her in my second-hand Morris Minor to Docking and married her. Her mother was very pleased, but she said this girl was born feeble-minded and was going to end up in a worse state than her. Don't leave her, she told me. I promised her I would keep her with me. Miyan Abba had sent me to study law. I used to attend the qualifying dinners at the Middle Temple and then wander around the city. I began preparing to come back to India. She never managed to get to her grandfather's marble halls, but as compensation, I brought her here to these modest apartments. I was considered weird, and it was expected of me that I would do something like this in England.

I told Miyan Abba and Amma that she was so-and-so viscount's granddaughter, so they were a bit appeased. I told Maggie that if I told them the truth, they would beat me to pulp.

"Amma asked me to divorce her and send her back, but I refused. Had I not decided to help a gypsy beggar?"

"But then why did you beat her?"

"Arrey, I had lost my mental balance. People thought I hadn't been able to face the loss of Teen Katori principality. This was not true. Political developments in the subcontinent had traumatised me. Sanity was disappearing from the world, and when at home my wife would say stupid things I would get irritated and hit her. You strike little children, don't you?"

"People said you were a sadist."

"People can say what they want. But it's true. If I had not tormented her so much, she would not have left."

"A person escapes when they cannot bear the situation," Feroza said. "She should have asked Nana Miyan to have her sent home."

"She considered Abba Miyan a tyrant and Amma an ogress. Just looking at them frightened her to death. Terrorised, she would crouch with fear in her room like a child. She didn't even have permission to go out because they were afraid they would be laughed at in society.

"And my two bad-tempered sisters—forgive me, Pinky, your mother and your Chhoti Khala—they never spoke kindly to Maggie, always snarling and snapping, rebuking and scolding her. Pinky, have you no memories of her?"

"I was very young, Mamu Miyan. All I remember is that she sometimes used to sing English songs for us."

"Yes, and she sang one song in her unique gypsy language. In the middle ages, gypsies probably took idols of Kali Devi with them. In Europe, they carried black statues which they called their patron saint. There were many Indian words in the songs that Maggie sang in the language of English gypsies. Words don't die easily. Pinky, you and Dinky argue about language, but remember that this nomadic Urdu might survive for another five hundred years."

"Mamu Miyan, you were telling us about Maggie Mumani."

"Ohoo—yes. So this original bohemian girl who was imprisoned by this ogre, through a peephole in her prison cell saw some vagabond singers who reminded her of her gypsy family and she set out with them in search of her lost freedom."

"But those weren't nomads, they were...."

"She didn't know the difference. The poor Englishwoman had hardly ever left this house."

"The condition of our eunuchs is miserable," Feroza said. "Look at the West. Look at those, one more glamorous than the other, who gather at night in Paris on the streets of Bois de Boulogne—it looks like a fairyland. A lot of them come in their cars. Here in South Asia, everything is dismal."

"Why?" Pinky challenged her. "In royal times they became ministers and statesmen. Khwajasara Tehsin Ali Khan who built the Tehsin mosque, Khwajasara Almas Ali Khan who built the Imambara Almas and Khwajasara Ambar Ali Khan...."

"Another sign of our decline," Vicky answered.

"Mamu Miyan, once on my insistence Khush Qadam Bua and Munne Khan took me to Tarr ka Mela. There, on platforms facing each other, two groups of eunuchs were exchanging jibes and witticisms and the crowd was roaring with laughter."

"The last example of eastern culture," Vicky Miyan said sarcastically.

A crested lark flew overhead, screeching. The three of them sat still in the summer house like a Chinese or Japanese painting.

Suddenly, the painting came alive. Pinky asked, "Mamu Miyan, I don't understand why Sulochana didn't stop Maggie Mumani from leaving this house. How did these poor, abject eunuchs have the courage to take away the older daughter-in-law of the Raja Sahib of Teen Katori?"

"They didn't know. There was a celebration in the gardener's family after which the family went to the temple. The eunuchs followed them. Maggie, too, covered her face with the end of her sari and went along. It was a moonless night. The next day, a

trembling Sulochana appeared before Abba Miyan and told him that Memsahib was at their dwelling, writhing on the floor but refusing to come back to the house, and asked if Raja Sahib could send his car to get her back.

"Miyan Abba was ready to go and fetch her, but Amma stopped him. It's good riddance, she said. Hand her over to the missionaries. Sulochana was given a large sum of money to pay for her food and other needs while Maggie was with them. Abba instructed Sulochana not to let Maggie be seen out on the streets. I didn't get to hear a word of what was going on.

"The Salvation Army people had opened a centre in Teen Katori village. The old white lady in charge often came to our fort. Amma made enquiries and found out that she was dead. A few days later Abba sent for the brigadier and the Mukti Fauj took Maggie away."

"The Mukti Bahini—was it around even then?" Feroza asked, surprised.

"Arrey, the Salvation Army," Pinky chided her gently.

"Maggie couldn't bear to live the regulated and controlled life of the Salvation Army, so she ran away again and joined Sulochana's group. Lala Kali Charan's trackers told him that the group had moved to Bihar. Brigadier Sahib succeeded in tracing and rounding her up and bringing her back. Who knows, she might have once again snapped her tether and run away. Man cannot fight against fate."

"You, too, believe that Mamu Miyan?"

"Sometimes. It's the same old question; why does this happen only to so-and-so? Why did this only happen to me? I can't find the answer to that."

Pinky tried to console him. "I have heard that Sulochana loved her like a daughter and that the whole community respected her a great deal. Most probably she was in search of a father figure, a role that neither Nana Miyan nor the Brigadier could fulfil. She found him in the humblest of creatures, the bird of paradise, Sulochana. Who knows what gems are hidden in the dust. I had just told Manek Khala about this at Shirin Castle. She said, come let's hope

that Maggie became a major in the Salvation Army and that she is somewhere, singing 'Onward Christian soldiers, marching on to war'. They must have sent her back to England."

"The Salvation Army itself moved from here. Who could I have asked?" said Vicky Miyan.

Feroza tried to distract him. "Bade Mamu, wasn't Bela Rani also an actress? I met Dilip Kumar in Switzerland—he is very, I mean...."

"He was the hero of our Jenny, Penny and Fenny's generation."

"Yes, that's what I meant."

Pinky began a conversation of interest to Vicky Miyan."So you don't believe in the transmigration of souls?'

"No, although there is a universal spirit. It is this that pervades and flows through all knowledge. This is Vedanta. And Taoism and Zen. Jalaluddin Rumi has said, 'I have witnessed seven hundred and seventy forms.'"

Pinky looked at his watch discreetly.

"You have to go somewhere?" Vicky Miyan abandoned his thought and got up, went down the steps and started walking along the small Japanese pond. "The lotus in the rains!" He looked at the lotuses spread over the water and said something unconnected.

"He's never been mad," Pinky whispered, "he is only a delightful eccentric. There is no place for such fine-tempered, dreamy people in our society anymore. We are not fit to be heirs even to his library. How many years does he have left now? He continues to contemplate eternal life, to garden, and keeps repeating, 'Not all, just a few flowers bloom.' I am sure he sees kinnars in the forest and parrots tell him stories. Feroza, he is one of those ancient poets whose intellect and imagination have created mythology.

"He sees clearly the spirit of Zen in Japanese gardens. *Puran Brahma*—Universal Spirit. He and we will merge with trees, plants and birds and keep reappearing." Pinky laughed suddenly. "Listening to Mamujan talk like this, a gentleman once said, imagine a bird coming and sitting in the window one pleasant morning in 2012 and saying in Uncle Vicky's voice, 'Maulana Rumi says....'

"Ferry, the thing is that permanent death after life is a fact."

"Are you saying that or is it that bird speaking in 2012?"

"I'm saying that. Nothing happens after death."

Vicky came back.

"Mamu Miyan—do I have your permission," Pinky said, standing up. "I have to go to a minister's house for dinner. We are about to get a major government contract. There will be a lot of profit in it."

"You have become a mammon-worshiper too quickly. Remember, till a few years ago respectable people didn't even mention wealth. It was considered inappropriate."

"Mamujan, I am a businessman now. How else would we be managing?"

After Pinky had gone Feroza returned to the request she had wanted to make from the beginning of the evening.

"Mamujan, there is this ...."

"Listen, there are five stages in a man's life. First, he is a romantic, like you. Then a revolutionary, like Qambar. Then a nationalist. Then a materialist. Finally, he becomes extremely religious. Or a spiritualist—a Sufi, or a pessimist. Or merely pompous."

"Mamujan, you are so interesting!"

"You mean I keep changing my channels. All right, then. You have rejected the shade of my kadam tree."

"Yes, for the English oak."

"Oh, ho—the shah balut! That's a good tree too. And beta, which soil have you sprung from?"

"I'm more at home in the West."

"What's wrong with that? You were mostly brought up there."

"And this is Ammi's home and all that, but it's an enemy nation."

Her uncle sighed.

His niece smiled and said, "For my friends, I've invented the expression 'Christian pink' instead of 'Indian pink'."

"I'm not surprised at what you say." He took a deep breath. "Your generation has seen two dreadful wars with each other. And the continuously negative press and hostile opinions."

"Wars can be agreeable too," she smiled.

"Riots and news about them repeatedly."

A pleasant breeze was blowing.

"All right then, that oak…"

"He was my classmate at London University."

"Didn't your parents object?"

"They did, vehemently. But he has agreed to become a Muslim. He is from a good family, and his great desire is that the wedding should be in the traditional Indian—I mean, South Asian, way. Elephants, horses, palanquins, the works."

"Is he an Indophile?"

"Somewhat. One of his English friends married a Brahmin in Udaipur—the holy fire, Vedic rituals, elephants, horses. Brian came with him, and now he wants the same."

"I'll arrange for an elephant. There is a palanquin in the godown."

"Oyoo, Mamujan, you are wonderful! Thank you."

"But will your father approve?"

"I'll make him come around. He does what I say. He's not a government employee, so there's no problem about coming here."

"Your father left as soon as he graduated from Aligarh in 1949. For his generation, changing nationality or keeping it depended on choice or compulsion. Now nationality depends on an accident of birth. If your father had stayed here and Pinky's father had sent for him, then today Dinky would have been what Pinky is, and Pinky would be what Dinky is, which means Dinky would have been Pinky and Pinky would have been Dinky. Get it?"

"Yes." *As if I care.*

"The other question is who is able to get the nationality of which white majority nation more easily."

He is totally crazy. But he is the Raja of Teen Katori now. No matter how much Badi Khala objects, if he permits it, then my South Asian wedding can take place here. And he might even get involved enough to make the arrangements himself.

"Bade Mamu, we will need some shohdahs."

"Is there any shortage of scoundrels these days?"

"No, the ones who are present at weddings."

"Shohdahs for weddings and mourning are still around. The duties of preparing the corpses of Shia gentlemen are still entrusted to them in the inner city."

Feroza shuddered. These old cultural traditions were very confusing.

"Will women from his family come, too?"

"Yes. Brian's eighty-year-old grandmother, Lady Moreland, is very keen."

"You mean two shows for the price of one—Raj nostalgia and native fancy dress wedding?"

What sort of madman is this? He twists everything around. But she didn't give up. "Brian's mother and sisters will come, too."

"Very good. Chunki our mirasin welcomes in-laws with the choicest of abuses. We will call her over."

She shuddered again. First, the shohadas who abuse indirectly. Now the professional female singer who utters the choicest of abuses. Old traditions! But she hadn't run through her agenda of requests yet. In a neutral tone, she added, "A few bhands, too."

"Sure, but I can't seem to recall which Kashmiris have inherited service to us."

"We—I mean—you—are the inheritance of some Kashmiris?" Feroza said, confounded.

"Will you call Batasha, please."

Nuran's husband Batasha, son of Batashan Bua, presented himself. "Sarkar."

"Isn't Teen Katori in the inheritance of Karanje, the bhand?

"Yes, Sarkar."

"Bade Mamu, how did Teen Katori end up being the inheritance of bhands? I am beginning to lose my mind."

It's the communication gap.

"Beta, mirasis and bhands inherit the right to serve different families from their ancestors. These families cannot invite any other singers or bhands. We will have to search for Karanje's faction. Batasha, will you go to Kashmiri Mohalla tomorrow?"

"All right, Sarkar, but I do not know where Karanje lives. I will go to the bhand mosque in Katra Abu Tarab and find out."

"Good, now you can go."

"Pinky will make the arrangements for the groom's party."

"Pinky…?"

"Why not? Isn't he your cousin? Just wait and see how well and gracefully he will fulfil the demands of being a relative. And the honeymoon in Nainital—at the Hotel Teen Katori?"

He lifted his head and looked at the moon. It was now above the stage of *The Bohemian Girl.*

"The gypsies of today have stolen you from the fort of the past!"

"Mamu Miyan, you were the real Bohemian, but you had to come back to your fort."

"You will settle in England. When seasons change, rivers change their course. How did the gypsy moon, which emerged from Jaisalmer and the Indus Valley, end up in Spain, Bohemia and Hungary? The river had changed its course."

The lawns were getting wet with dew. He got up from his chair with the help of a cane. "Let's go in so that our happy family can have their dinner."

Keep every thorn sharpened in this wilderness of passion
Perhaps someone with blistered feet might follow me.

*

It is now eleven-thirty at night. After talking to Uncle Vicky and having had my dinner, I have come back to my room to send you some good news. Uncle Vicky immediately agreed—an Indian wedding for an English groom. Your clothes will be ready along with the turban and its plume. You will look exactly like the Prince of Bukhara from *Lala Rukh.* My aunts will sulk. But Pinky, my cousin, whose offer for marriage I have rejected, has shown incredible generosity. Now you can mount an elephant. It will be a lot of fun. Bring the television guys along with you.

Next week we are going to Terai which borders Nepal for a few days, where my cousin Amina's in-laws have a farm. My younger

Uncle Bobby does not join in in these family get-togethers. After my grandfather's death he had a quarrel with my older uncle over property, mainly because Uncle Vicky married the granddaughter of the housekeeper. My grandmother who was extremely despotic had arranged that match. She was referred to as Queen Victoria by her family. Uncle Vicky was slightly abnormal those days. His children were all born fine and intelligent. Uncle Bobby was upset, and for years he fought a court case. In this conflict, the family was destroyed and the wood apple jungle had to be sold. The Teen Katori Hotel survived and the court awarded it to Uncle Vicky. He has improved it a great deal. It is now an English-style guest house of the kind that was very popular during the rule of your people. Outside the door is a signboard like your inns on which three cups have been painted. Outside one lounge, exactly in the English style, it says 'Teas'. At the afternoon tea, scones are served in willow-patterned blue plates. The atmosphere of Nainital in your times was completely British. Now it is the opposite. Anyway, you can come and see for yourself. I will write again if I find the time when I am close to the mountains.

*

As she did when they were children, Zarina stood on the veranda and called out, "Pinky, Dinky, Shelly, Amy, Ferry," as if she were taking a roll-call. Then, as was her habit, she muttered to herself, may Allah look after them.

High-spirited voices answered from all round, "Yes ma'am, yes ma'am."

"Vicky, Bobby...." The last name stuck in her throat. Bobby had been absent from such family gatherings for years.

"Vicky," she called out again.

"He is in the garden," Rani Dulhan answered.

"Just mark my words, one day he too will be sitting on a banyan tree like Baba Neem Chameli, Penny."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Fenny."

"She is performing her ablutions."

"Shelly."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And me," Zarina said pointing to herself with her thumb just like the old days.

Mrs Dhondy arrived, flustered.

"Sahibji, Manek Bai, how are you? All well?" Vicky called out from the pathway.

"Fali, Mehnaz," Zarina completed the roll call. They moved towards the cars, all very happy. They had temporarily forgotten all tension, sorrows and troubles. Dinky said to Pinky, "Yaar, why were we given these English names? Could they not have been Janno, Panno instead of Jenny and Penny? And Vakku, Babbu?"

"Class becomes apparent," said Pinky getting into the car, "from names and their aliases. Babbu Sharbati will obviously be a cotton carder or weaver."

"But, yaar, the English missionaries gave names like Jenny and Penny to lower-caste converts when they baptised them."

"Names like these were also given by our English governesses to baba log like us. There is so much inherent snobbery in being called Jacky Singh and Dicky Khan."

"In our democratic time, our people have changed names that they thought were degrading. Cotton carders call themselves Mansuri after Mansur al Hallaj. Barbers have become Salmani. Educated former Harijans call themselves Mauryas."

"Maurya? Why is that?"

"The mother of Chandragupta Maurya was a Shudra."

"They've discovered a very old kinship!"

"Most of us, too, are descendants of former robber barons, but God knows what we called ourselves. For a social scientist this information..."

"Pinky, come on, move," his mother called out.

Vicky, his wife and family, had got into his brand new red Maruti van. Mehnaz and Amina came towards Pinky's car.

"Call Salima here," Mehnaz said.

"She is going with her parents," Amina replied softly. "There is a great deal of politics around match-making and weddings going

on here. I'm taking everyone to the Terai so that they get distracted and some of the tension is reduced."

Manek Bai carried an attaché case with great care into the car. "Give it to me," Amina said.

"Never! You have children, your hands won't be clean. Safia, you take this. You are pure. There is an offering for Salar Baba's grave in this."

"No, I won't, I can't."

"Arrey, Chhoti Khala, you've just performed your ablutions," Amina was irritated.

"Oh, there was again a splash on my sari. It's horrible; Vicky is always having the garden watered."

"Feroza, Parveen, Shehla, come in my car." Zarina was standing in the portico busy directing traffic. "There, those two are off again," she sighed.

"Feroza is soon going to get married here," Shehla let out the secret without thinking.

Crossing the bridge over the river, Pinky said to Dinky—"Karnail Ganj in district Gonda is in the back of beyond. In Qaiser Ganj, at the point where the Sarju meets the Ghagra, magnificent game birds, including the Brahminy duck, land. Flock upon flock. Before wildlife preservation laws, I heard that the late Thakur Raghubir Singh used to hunt these Brahminy ducks."

In the second car, Amina said to Feroza, "Begum Hazrat Mahal went to Nepal via this route. Where we are going, peasants still sing Alha for her faithful follower, Rana Beni Madho Baksh who went with her. The manly Madho Baksh..."

"What is an Alha?"

"Oh, gosh, you are too much."

"If we don't know what the hell Alha is what's wrong with that?" snapped Feroza.

"Alha and Udal were great warriors; swords acknowledged their might!" Amina repeated, ignoring Feroza's sharp retort. She was out on a mission of reconciliation. "We will also call some bhaats for your picturesque oriental wedding."

After the non-fruition of the match between Feroza and Pinky, there had begun a competition in good behaviour between guests and hosts over Indo-Pak relations. Feroza, too, realised that a cease-fire was necessary.

*

"Your roads are excellent," she remarked generously.

"Your roads, too."

Feroza was immediately tempted to say that her Abbu had given her a new Honda Accord. When you come this time, I will take you for a ride in it. She kept quiet, fearing that Amina would ask, what is a Honda Accord? It's amazing; these people are not familiar with the names of foreign cars! Yesterday, Dinky had mentioned Pajero Kids and had to explain what a Pajero was.

Corruption was the safest subject. Therefore, Feroza said modestly, "There is so much corruption in our country."

"It has crossed all limits here."

"Our educational standards have declined."

"Conditions here, too, are awful."

"That's not so. Scores of universities have been set up in Bharat."

"Universities? Or stables!"

"What's a ghursaal?"

In the other car similar goodwill and cordiality was on display.

"Yaar, Dinky, your television plays are incomparable.

10

Char Khoont Mein Naubat Baje

Kettledrums Play All Around

"It's slack," the old harmonium-master said, using the secret phrase of his community which meant that the place was useless and they should move on. Chameli Begum, her back bent, her hair white, immediately started gathering up their belongings. Badshah Jani, still dressed as a dandy, was wearing a bright bush-shirt and red trousers. He stroked his henna-dyed long hair and said, "Oh grief, where to? Rest here for a while. You two need a break."

The Ustad was a man of etiquette. Respectfully he answered, "Huzoor Prince (shahzade), we have lost our court case, not our spirits. I'm in my eightieth year, and this fortunate one is a few years younger. But we nomads have made Allah Miyan bestow us with healthy bones. This is our last visit to Lucknow so let us visit Bahraich. This year we attended only two Urs, both in Maharashtra. (Once upon a time, Bahar Phulpuri would similarly say, regretfully, these last six months, and I've only been invited to six mushairas.)

Badshah Jani got on to a rickshaw and disappeared in the crowded lane.

When Ustad was leaving Bombay for the court hearing (which turned out to be the last one) his old patron, Seth Abdur Rahman, the bakery owner in Bhindi Bazaar, had asked him to stay, as usual, at his house in Lucknow. His younger brother who now ran a Chinese restaurant also lived there. They stayed in this three-storeyed house decorated with coloured tiles, and heard the court rule in favour of Shaikh Elephant-Trader after the prolonged legal hearing, and were now ready to move again. Chameli Begum gathered her luggage and water-pot, and the two, along with their

son Gulab, reached the Qaiser Bagh bus depot from where an Uttar Pradesh Roadways bus left every five minutes for various towns and districts in the state. They emerged from the milling crowd and joined the long queue in front of the Bahraich window.

*

Like a troupe of travellers—so fell the trail of bloody tears from the eyes
Like a troupe of travellers—so left Bale Miyan's wedding party for Bahraich.

(Mir Insha)

Four hundred years earlier Tulsi Das had seen 'the world travel to Bahraich'. The world was still heading in that direction in special buses, taxis, cars, tractors and bullock-carts which were called Dunlops because of their tyres.

Cripples, the sick, the blind who would begin to see the way the blind Zohra Bibi did because of Ghazi Miyan's miracle. The same Zohra Bibi was going to be married to Ghazi Miyan on the first Sunday of the month of Jeth. This crowd was going to be part of the groom's party singing, 'Gaji Pir is getting married, Gaji Pir'. Gaji Miyan's male friends' arrived from all over, striking tambourines and singing, 'Drums play all around, for Sayyid Salar Masud Gaji'.

Getting off the bus from Lucknow, Masterji, his wife and son headed towards the dargah sharif. Gulab seated his parents under a tamarind tree and hurried towards the musafir khana to find a place for them. The parents sat under the tree like two tiny warblers. A little while later Parizada returned and said, "Abba, the place is teeming with fellow Muslims from Gorakhpur and Mirzapur. Now I'll go and look elsewhere. Don't get up, or you will get lost."

Gulab had given up his teddy-boy trousers and worn bell-bottoms for a few years while they were in fashion. Now, for the last few years, he had been tying a tahmad around his waist. He had grown his hair and his beard which had begun to grey. In Bombay, after having divorced his Deccani wife Nemat Bai, he married a Konkani beauty, Hajira Bi. After leaving her, a spirited

Maharashtrian named Jamuna Bai, whom he called Jamila Bai, ran his home in a hut in Mahim. He was childless. Currently, he had adopted the honourable profession of black-marketing cinema tickets. He was now beginning to lose interest even in that. After losing the legal battle in Lucknow, the whole bloody world seemed useless. He roamed around the fair and returned after an hour. "Abba, I've checked everywhere—Khateeb Bagh, Zohra Bagh, Naurang Bagh, this bagh, that bagh. Everywhere, pilgrim troupes from Basti, Gonda, Jaunpur, Banaras, Sultanpur, Kanpur and god knows where else are camping. There is a Raja's kothi whose compound is also full of marriage parties. But let's go there—we will find a place in some corner."

After passing through a mango grove the three of them entered a large compound. In the veranda of the kothi a dafali balladeer was drumming the tambourine and singing loudly—'Gajiji, your devotees salute you, we salute you; You wear the mark of distinction, you rule, the sorrowful find succour at your feet.'

It was cool near the well. They spread their durrie under an umbrella-shaped mango tree. Gulab disappeared again to get food for his warbler parents.

Under the jamun tree, qawwals were singing—

Emperor of his time, at home in the Ka'ba, of python the slayer, of Khaiber, the conqueror
The Light Sublime, the Lion of God, the Moon of eminence, of Najaf, the ruler
Allah gave him his sword, his Prophet, his daughter
Look at me too, Maula Ali, misfortune remover.

"Maula have mercy, Maula have mercy," Chameli Begum repeated silently and wiped her tears with the end of her sari. She said to her husband, "Gul e Abbas was ten years old when we came here with Hanifan Bua. Before we went to Bombay."

"Yes, the German war was still on. And Mumtaz Shanti's *Basant* —

"In Bombay people would tell me, your wife is so much prettier than Mumtaz Shanti, she can become a heroine, but you said, never,

am I whore that I should become a heroine? I am respectable, a mirasin in purdah. Due to our circumstances you had to play a sister-in-law and sister."

"I was also the heroine of *Gul e Bakawali ki Beti*, remember. It was just my luck that the film flopped."

Chameli Begum couldn't forget her daughter for a minute and kept moaning about her. "Hanifan Bua was a Sunni. She said before you go to Bombay seek a favour for Gul e Abbas; that she marries into a good family and when that happens, come here immediately and make an offering. Let's take our trousseau for Zohra Bibi. I had bought a tiny silver bed, a silver divan, a pair of little sandals."

"Silver was cheap in those days," Masterji said, clearing his throat.

"What a huge dust storm there was on the day of Ghazi Miyan's wedding. My request for Gul e Abbas's marriage too was granted by the invisible power."

"Hoon."

"We didn't even come to ask for the blessing for the cursed film, *Gulzar e Muhabbat*."

"Where was the time for that, good one?" He stretched his legs and lit a bidi. Chameli Begum leant against the tree and threw some tobacco into her mouth. These two were defeated and tired brave-hearts who had taken off their armour to rest.

"If I had come to offer thanks for my daughter's marriage, she would not have died."

"Again, the same regret. Where did we have the time for that? There was the telegram from Bawaji asking us to come to Bombay, and right then there was Kale Khan with an invitation to perform the *Inder Sabha*. And Gul e Abbas disappeared. Ghrrrr, like the train in the film *Tufani Toli*. She went upstairs like fairies leave the stage mounted on a machine. When Akhtari Bai...."

"There you go, Akhtari Bai again," his wife was irritated.

"Then we returned to the city from Chinhat and Bela's letter arrived from the hills. None of you should ever come to the kothi, or you will regret it. Go to Bombay immediately and don't make

any fuss. I now have to live and die with Sahib. I will soon come to Bombay, and then I'll see my dear father's face...."

"Have you started eating opium or what? Where in that letter was the nautanki song, 'I'll see my dear father's face', mentioned?"

"But she didn't come. That day in Chinhat she climbed those stairs, my poor daughter. For us that was the moment she left the world. We never saw her again."

"Hai re, Maula, Maula."

"Fortunate one, how much will you weep? You've spent half your life weeping. You'll lose your eyesight."

"What is there left to see that if I were to go blind, it would become dark?"

A man came up close to them. He took his luggage off his shoulder and said harshly to Chameli Begum, "Old crone, you've taken up most of the space. Move over." He took out soap and a towel from his bag and went towards the well. Chameli moved her mat with her dry, wrinkled hands and then began to stare at her wrists. She had sold her gold bracelets to meet the expenses of the court case. How long have I been wearing these silver bangles and these red glass bangles I put on for the last Eid. They are dirty now. This time from this fair, inshallah, I will surely buy green and red bangles. May Allah keep the father and son alive.

A cuckoo called from the mango tree and she was immediately transported to her village. She said to her husband, "When I was in the village I would go with my mother to the landowner's house on Basant Panchami with tufts of mango flowers."

"Hoon."

The bad-tempered man returned rubbing his shaved head with the towel. He hung his towel on a branch, stared at the couple and then went towards the fair.

Master laughed bitterly. "The poor guy doesn't know that he was speaking to a heroine of yesteryear."

"But they all fared better than me. Vilochana from Lucknow is happily flying around with her red hair in a car on Queen's Road. She was a heroine with Ranjit Studio."

"She is an instructor in a driving school," Mogra corrected her. "And Zeb Jahan walks around the streets of Mahim with a staff. The star of her times, Cuckoo died in awful circumstances. When did we stand a chance? Dom is inscribed on our faces—we are carrion eaters."

"God forbid! We have been Muslims for fourteen generations. May our enemies have to eat carrion. What rubbish, Masterji."

"But we were called doms—the accompanists to courtesans. They paid us with their ill-gotten earnings, which means we were eating carrion. We were considered so low that there were idioms about our baseness. We doms and domnis, what was our worth? Keep quiet and think of Allah instead."

Gulab who strutted around like the film villain Mac Mohan, appeared and placed a bowl and bundle of naan in front of his mother. He had heard his father and said, "Wah, Abba, that's great! And these bloody high castes aren't carrion-eaters? And politicians? These frauds and swindlers. They can roast innocents within minutes. They live off ill-gotten wealth, and we are called doms—we who entertain people, make the unhappy laugh—we—the artistes."

A girl was passing by. Seeing her, he raised his voice, and in the style of the angry young man, Amitabh Bachchan, tied a handkerchief around his neck, kissed his amulet and threw out a challenge, "This corruption, this oppression and we, the artistes—I will change society; I'm going to extract severe revenge from these cruel rich men."

"In this business of extracting revenge from rich men you've already spent six years in prison. Keep quiet." Masterji scolded him softly.

"Abbajan, you're smoking bidis now. I used to get you crates of imported cigarettes from Madh Island. In this world, you can achieve nothing by being straight. All your life you've been digging the hole of respectability, now go, get buried in it. Come on, take the name of Allah and start eating. Have some fried meat, and this seekh kabab. And some malka masoor daal. I've brought these from the shop set up by the royal cooks of Nanpara."

The three sat down to eat. Gulab chewed his food loudly and flung the bones at a distance. They kept talking. "Listen, parents, in religious scriptures it says you shouldn't steal, kill or lie. Where does it say you shouldn't smuggle? Listen..." he looked around and said, "From Nepal, I can...."

"Keep quiet, scoundrel," his father pleaded.

Gulab brought water in a green plastic glass from the bucket in the well. Then in a furtive tone he said, "All right, so Abbaji, we will go from here straight to Delhi."

"Why Delhi?" Mogra asked while picking his teeth.

"Shall I tell you something? What happened was that at Qaiser Bagh bus depot I met two brothers called Anokhe and Chaukhe and their father Sharbati—Bangladeshi agents to beat all other agents."

"So?"

"They said that flock upon flock of Bangladeshis had landed in Seemapuri on the banks of the Jamuna."

"So?"

"Those three find work for the women."

Mogra pricked up his ears; displeasure and worry appeared on his face.

"No, Daddy, it's not that. Just sweeping-swabbing the homes of the respectable people of Delhi. Sweeping and swabbing in the houses of the respectable in Karachi."

"Bengalis had cut themselves off from Karachi. Have they joined them again?" Mogra asked.

"Hunger is very mighty," his son sang in reply, "hunger is very mighty."

"Is this a new scam?" his mother asked.

Problem upon problem, trouble upon trouble. There was a film forty years ago—*Toofani Toli*, grrrr, neither its engine broke down nor its machinery.

"You see, Anokhe said that there in Bangladesh, there were thousands of pious Muslims stranded in camps—hungry and naked, without friend or assistance."

"Where?" his father asked.

"In nowhere land, between the sky and the earth. The missionaries began helping them with medicines, schools, jobs and all the Muslim brethren, in one go along with their wives and children...." Gulab made the sign of the cross the way the Goans of Bombay did.

"Hai, hai," Chameli shuddered.

"So what? Anokhe and Chaukhe found the poor women of Seemapuri some work. What's wrong in that?"

"I get that," Mogra said succinctly. "Gullu, you are sitting here in the compound of Ghazi Pir and thinking of despicable schemes. Go to the fair and earn something lawfully!"

"Okay, Daddy, helplessness is called gratitude." To his mother, he said, "I went and saw the shrine of Lilli, the mare. I also learnt a song about her:

Lilli the mare, daughter of the wind
Runs faster than the wind
Miyan jumped up and straddled her
His foes all ran away.

He had bought a small dafli. "We will play this and sing and earn something lawfully. You better learn some songs about Ghazi Miyan."

"I know them. Amma, Hanifan Bua, Shadda Khala, all used to sing them.

Lady-gardener, bring me some jasmine buds
I'll offer them to Allah Miyan, those jasmine buds.

Mogra began to play the daf.

To five pirs I will offer wild jasmine buds
To Ghazi Miyan I will offer the jasmine buds
'Ali! Ali!' call out the jasmine buds.

"I will offer Allah Miyan bela buds—Bela—" Chameli's voice choked with emotion, and she began to weep.

"Oh ho, Amma, come, wash your face, gargle," Gulab said affectionately.

The channel from the well carrying clear water was close by. All three washed their hands and faces. Mogra said, "God be praised. It's like being in heaven. Cool shade and flowing water, thank you, Maula."

All three lay down to nap on the durrie.

Chameli Begum put her arm across her forehead and closed her eyes and fell asleep. She was walking with tiny steps, holding her mother Jafar Bandi's finger and carrying bunches of mango blossoms till she reached the fort of the old Khan Sahib.

Was it her or was it Bela? No, it was her, Chameli. Amma always made her wear clothes glittering with tinsel when she took her to the houses of hereditary claimants to their services. In spring she would wear yellow, paddy green in the monsoon and black during Muharram. No, it was Bela, dressed in a gold-laced red frock and cap, looking like a little monkey. With her large eyes, she would stare at everyone attentively, in amazement. People asked her to sing, and she stood like a little doll and began to sing, 'When mother cried, the world cried with her and my father fainted. My sister-in-law stood and grinned.' Shudda Khala enacted the words as Bela sang. Shudda Khala, who was as dark as an African, was a mirasan held in high esteem and sang only for Sayyid and pathan ladies. Her voice was like a koel in the forest. She lost her voice when she lost her young son. Bela died, and I lost my voice too. Where did it go? It went where my daughter went. 'Lady-gardener bring me some jasmine buds, I will offer them to Allah Miyan, some bela buds.'

She turned on her side. *It's the old Khan Sahib's house in the village. The sister-in-law was asking for gold bracelets on the birth of her nephew. Everyone persuades the new mother to give them. Her father-in-law too came in to convince his daughter-in-law to give away the bracelets she was wearing. She is a stranger now. How can I give my bracelets away to her? When I send you away this time, I will never invite you back again. The sister-in-law answers, may my brother and his son live long. If you don't send for me, I will get on a chariot and come myself. The rhythm of the drum. The merry laughter of the ladies.*

Chameli rolled over again. A large ant was crawling on her wrist.

It had been thirty years since her daughter's death—the cuckoo called from the trees—ku oo ku oo ku oo.

The moon is making patterns in my courtyard.

Ku oo—ku oo—the mango trees are swaying in the breeze.

An intense green light through the eyelids. Green leaves above. Foliage all around. Mangoes all over. A cuckoo on its perch calling out—where is my beloved, where is my beloved—ku oo ku oo?

The father and son had fallen into deep sleep. A man squatting on the rim of the well was loudly, and tirelessly, reciting, 'An offering for Bibi Fatima'. Chameli Begum already knew that the offering for Janab Sayyida was brought from the heavens by the huris. This was first received by the pure and the Imams and then the saints. Now the entire community was guarding it. The village singer was reciting this in a monotone. Chameli dozed off again and found Shudda Bua singing songs to Bibi Fatima too.

Bibi's bangles have come from heaven, she put them on her wrists, may the community sacrifice itself for you. Bibi's jewellery came from heaven, she decked herself and got married, may the community sacrifice itself for you. I too planted a bela. It's been thirty years, I would have had grandchildren. I planted bela, and I planted chameli, may there be light in your streets, Allah.

Beside her head the water in the channel from the well was flowing.

Suddenly, the cuckoo screamed, Perfume Fairy.

Allah Jillai, from today I'm going to call you Perfume Fairy, the wanton son of Nawab Hashmat Jahan Begum had said.

Hai hai hai!

Hai!

The Perfume Fairy? Chameli Devi of cinema? Or Yasmeen Banu Bhawnagari, leader of the qawwali group? Or Chameli Amma, the roadside vendor of food?

Hai, hai, hai, hai.

The cuckoo called out Perfume Fairy.

The dust-covered silence of the afternoon.

The gushing of water.

The snores of Master Mogra.

I'll wring your neck, you wretched trickster, Parizada Gulab mumbled in his sleep. The sandpiper sitting on the beam of the well screamed, Al atash, I'm very thirsty.

The leaves rustled, Perfume Fairy. The sudden chorus of crows. *Old crone, you old crone.*

You old crone, you've taken up all the space—move over.

The voices of the qawwals under the jamun tree. *Shame on you, Oh sky! The evil speakers in the shade. The descendants of the Prophet burning in the sun. The sun afraid to be turned around, blazed on.*

Chameli Begum covered her face with her sari-end. She forgot about her miseries and began to weep for the misfortunes of the descendants of the Prophet. She cried till she was hiccoughing. A little while later she became quiet, wiped her face and lay still.

After the evening prayers, drums started beating in the drum house at the horseshoe gate. Drums played again at the time of midnight prayers. People were awake all night. At dawn, the shehnai began to play on the lit-up platform. A hubbub began in the fortress of Firuz Shah Tughlaq, the mosque and at the gates.

Carrying standards, beating drums, the groom's parties kept arriving. The names of the towns and the villages they were from were announced on loudspeakers. Items for Zohra Bibi's trousseau were being recorded in a register.

In the morning, the family got a place on the veranda of the pilgrim's rest house. Gulab had disappeared, looking to earn some money. After breakfast he came back running, very pleased with himself. "Abbaji, I have made a deal with a man called Abdul Karim Baji Kor from Calcutta. He has a bioscope in his tent. He said he had no time to show people his bioscope because the public wants to see the magic of Bengal instead. He told me to try it out, and we could share the profits fifty-fifty. He says that today even the children in the village see television and no longer want to see the washerwoman weighing twelve maunds. You see, Abba, these days even these Nats project cinema reels and play a gramophone record along with it. The Bengali Nat said he had brought religious films

for Gaji Miyan's fair—*Niyaaz aur Namaaz, Mere Gharib Nawaz, Dayar i Madina.* I told him I was a man from the film industry and these films were made fifteen years ago in Bombay and had modern stories then. I said, Abdul Karim Bhai, the hero and heroine go to Mecca and Medina riding a camel, but today even village children are very smart. Their brothers and fathers have gone to Medina to drive air conditioned cars. Pilgrims now fly from Bombay. The magician said, that's right, but our fellow Muslims see the glory of Islam only in the camel. Camels and date-palms are embedded in their eyeballs. So I said, no problem, camels will do. But show a scene from *Coolie* about the power of the Holy numerals 786. He said, I have screened that scene so often in Calcutta and its adjoining villages that it is now completely worn down. I've bought a reel of all the dargahs of the country. And another showing P.C. Sorkar performing magic."

Gulab was a mimic, son of another mimic. Abandoning the Bengali accent he was speaking in, he put on the Deccani accent of his first wife from Poona, Nemat Bai, and asked, "Amma do you want a frying pan? And a tray and stove? Take thread for the shrine from me?"

"Nakko," she too answered in Deccani . She wanted to sleep.

The fair began to fill up. At a distance from the dargah, a Nat and his children were performing magic tricks. Master Gulab set up his bioscope next to them. Opposite them camped the Dil Farosh Natak Company of Kashipur.

Master Mogra knew that like the Kashmiri bhands who had settled in Nakkhas in Lucknow, the bhands of Kashipur and Moradabad were also well known. The two tycoons of show business, Ustad Mogra and Master Nabban Khan, owner of Dil Farosh Company, began talking.

"How is work, Khan Sahib," Ustad asked, lighting a bidi.

"Slow. It is dying." The elderly Nabban Khan took off his black velvet cap and stroked his head. "Melas for Ghazi Sahib's pennants are held in our area too, but our business has sunk because of television. The music and dance at the nauchandi fair in Kalyar

Sharif used to be famous all over the world, but for the last fifteen years or so, the maulvis have put a stop to that."

Masterji expressed his sorrow with his silence.

"And the government is sending performing bears and monkeys and their trainers to Paris."

"Is the nauchandi being organised abroad now?"

"No, sir, India Fairs—drums, trumpets, tribal dances; female brigands and hill women—they are all being sent."

The voice of Nabban Khan's wife rose from inside their camp. "Come on, get up, the tent is full. She can't get enough sleep, come on, get up."

"That's our heroine, Lado Telan."

"Lado, the oil-presser! For God's sake, why did you not change her name?"

"She became popular with this name. The last one, Naajo, was greedy. She got a work permit and went to Dubai looking for wealth. I found this one at the nauchandi fair in Meerut. She is an oil-presser's daughter and had run away from home. She has a good voice, but I had to work hard to train her. Khan Sahib, my late father, founded this Company. Some of the great singers from Dal Mandi in Agra used to be on our staff. What can I do, times have changed."

He went inside his camp and came out with a tray of rolled-up betel leaves. "My wife sends her greetings."

"Give her my blessings," Masterji said, putting a betel-cone into his mouth.

"Oh good one, send out some tea, please," Nabban Khan called out, "quickly."

Mogra was reminded of Sanobar Company and the qawwali party, and felt a jolt to his heart. He remembered the encampments of the Marathi tamasha and lavani dance companies. The tour in Karnataka where someone had cast Bhanmati's curse on poor Bela, and how Bela had fallen ill.

His host offered him a foggy glass of tea. How long would even this poor Nabban Khan last? He is brave and has managed to survive for so long.

Nabban Khan and Masterji got along very well and exchanged all sorts of stories. Nabban Khan told him how he had discovered Naajo. "We were going to the fair at Garhmukteshwar. We reached Mandawar in the district of Bijnor, and in the moonlight what did we see but a fort! A European fort! We camped amongst its ruins. We found out about a munshiji who had gone to London.

"Ah ha! 'Hazrat goes to London, be kind, Lord Krishna Raghunandan!'"

Mogra half-closed his eyes.

"What is that ....?"

"Nothing bhai, I was just reminded of something."

"Go ahead, tell us," his host drew bubbles through his huqqa.

"Our Nawab was supposed to go to London and plead with Queen Victoria about his affairs. Our Hindu brethren were very sad about it so they made up that song."

Nabban Khan thought about for it for a few moments and then began to speak again. "This munshiji from Mandawar went to London to teach Queen Victoria Urdu. He returned a very rich man, built a fort in the English fashion and began living in it happily."

"Wah, wah, the fortunes of both Wajid Ali Shah and the munshi changed. Because of Queen Victoria. One lost his palace, the other built himself one."

"Praise God, Chacha, what a pithy analogy that is."

"I was making no analogy, I was reassuring you, Nabban Khan. In the Holy Quran, Allah, our Creator, has said that he changes around the fortunes of people."

Nabban Khan closed his eyes and seemed to swoon. Then he said, "It's true. And then, Masterji, then there was Partition. The munshiji's descendants moved to Pakistan. Now the palace is a ruin and a jungle grows inside it."

"Nabban Khan," Mogra sighed deeply, "Inside you and me, too, there is a wilderness."

"True, true," Nabban Khan said. "So, I found this girl inside a room in the fort, cutting grass. She said her father was a woodcutter, burdened with seven daughters, and that she was afraid he might

sell her in the market at Nakkhas. She asked me to take her with me. I said, come. The father was happy because his burden was lighter, but I had to work very hard to train her."

"I hope you didn't call her Naajo the grass-cutter."

Nabban Khan had a good laugh. "No sir, I called her Miss Nazneen, but she was famous only as Naajo. Then she became cunning. Contractors were clearing forests and denuding the hills of their lime in our area. She created lots of commotion there. Jeeps began to arrive to pick her up. We might not be aristocracy, but we are respectable people. I was ashamed. At home, she began to complain, saying what we paid her was not enough. Lo and behold, she too had her passport made and...."

"It's like the rail in *Tufani Toli* which keeps running, ghrrr... ghrrr..."

Nabban Khan thought that the Ustad was talking about films, so he said, 'Masterji, I've come here straight from the exhibition in Rampur. Let me tell you about a company that was full of Bombay girls."

"Extras."

"It must have been them. They would play film songs on loudspeakers, and the girls danced obscenely to them. They drew all the crowds."

Imam Bandi, the wife of Nabban Khan, got along very well with Chameli Begum who spent the entire day in her camp. When Lado, tinkling her silver anklets, got busy with her make-up, Chameli was reminded of Bela. That exquisite daughter of hers used to walk as musically.

Parizada had always been partial to the charms of women. He turned his attention to the heroine of Dil Farosh Company, but she ignored him. "She thinks she is Sridevi," he complained to Abdul Karim, the magician.

This corner of the fair remained very busy. The magician would carry on his nonsensical chatter, loud voices singing songs with the beat of the tabla came from the theatre tent. *My beloved is sparkling today, a canopy over his head, his crown glittering, his face and body*

glowing from the earth to the skies. The mightiest lord from here to the skies. Applause—drum roll signalling more applause—kar kar—*The moons stares at my beloved and feels embarrassed.*

At another end, Master Gulab, holding a fog horn to his mouth, screamed at the top of his voice—Come, come—dear children, come—kids—youngsters—come and see the magic of Raja Inder—see the garden of Soloman—here now, gone in a moment!

Oh, mighty Allah! Master Mogra remembered the first time he had gone to meet Qambar Miyan. Qambar had read the advertisement for the Sanobar Film Company and asked, what is this, a film company or the company garden? He had answered immediately, Yes sir—it's the Garden of Soloman!

Oh mighty Allah—Garden of Soloman or Red Rose Garden, here this moment, gone the next.

Gulab was reasonably intelligent. He called out in the way of street entertainers—Come this way please Baji, beta, see the holy tomb of Hussain, the shrine of Haji Waris the Saint, scenes from *Mere Gharib Nawaz, Dayar i Madina, Niyaaz aur Namaz*, come bhaiya, come apiya.

On a sackcloth next to the bioscope sat Masterji. He had written 'Professor Samri of Bombay' in bold letters in Urdu and Hindi on a cardboard and placed it in front. Professor Samri was a renowned astrologer and necromancer in Bombay who had died a few years earlier—but who knew about that here.

Gulab would successfully gather crowds from Juhu to Chowpatty, trying to sell collyrium and tooth-powder from Bareilly.

While calling out to customers for his bioscope he would break into calls of—Come, patrons and benefactors, bhaijan, mataji, didi, chacha, the personal astrologer of film stars, the famous fortune-teller, palmist and necromancer, Professor Samri of Bombay; see success in your legal cases, meet your beloved, marry whom you want, destroy your enemy in trade and business, job in Abu Dhabi—for five rupees, only five rupees.

On the first Sunday in the month of Jeth, on the day of Ghazi Miyan's marriage, as usual there was a dust storm.

The fair was about to end. Gulab settled accounts with Abdul Karim, returned the bioscope, and said to his mother, "Come, let's scram otherwise we won't find a place on the bus."

The parents wished Nabban Khan and his wife, Imam Bandi, a teary farewell and all four asked for forgiveness if they had unwittingly said anything to offend. Chameli Begum began to cry. Mogra, the optimist, consoled her, "Aji, why are you crying? Inshallah, we will meet again soon."

"I've got one foot in the grave, how will we meet?" Chameli Begum answered. "Consider yourself lucky if we manage to reach Bombay." She sat down on the ground and opened her box. Took out a photograph and gave it to Imam Bandi. "Bitiya, you keep this as a reminder."

"Is it of Bela?"

"No, it's your aunt," Mogra said. The couple from Kashipur had begun to address Mogra and Chameli as Chacha and Chachi. Nabban Khan and Imam Bandi were dumbstruck.

"From *Gul e Bakawali ki Beti*!" Mogra informed them and smiled. "Allah the Magnificent has said in the glorious Quran that whenever he wants, he can change the form of people. Khan Sahib, time plays havoc with people. Come on, good one. The encampment is dismantled, pick up your sackcloth and untie the mules."

Carrying their baggage, the three passed the gate of the shrine. Masterji said, "Let's ask for a favour before we go."

"For what, now?" the son said in surprise.

"Bahar Sahib was talking about a kabab-paratha restaurant in America. My heart tells me that we will be successful in that."

Gulab took the bag off his shoulder, put it down and shouted a sky-renting slogan, "God is the truth!" then began to writhe on the ground.

A village woman, wearing a jaundiced yellow gharara and paddy green dupatta, who was passing by, stopped near Chameli Begum and asked, "Is he in a trance?"

"Yes."

"Which saintly man is he?

"Baba Lotun Kabutar," the mother answered sharply.

The woman went her way.

"Why are you thrashing around like a slaughtered ass, you idiot?" his mother scolded him. When she was angry, she would lapse into eloquent Bombay idiom.

Gulab dusted his legs, stood up, came near her and said, "Arrey, Mummyji, I went into a rapture when I heard what the 'Sun among Musicians', Padamshri Imam Bakhsh, gharana of Umeedpur, just said."

Now it was his father who scolded him. "You fool, am I [the] Khoji [of *Fasana e Azad*]? Don't you know that pessimism is blasphemy?" Mogra sat at the gate leaning against one of the canons.

"Yes, Daddy, do you know that a mother's blessing takes effect immediately? There was Mummy telling a lady that I was Baba Lotun Kabutar and immediately I turned into one. I've turned into Saint Master Dil Farosh. Now, straight to Lucknow and from there to Dadar Station and from there straight to the Mahim dargah. Chakotra can take care of south Bombay, I will handle the north. Master Dil Farosh, 'Circulating over the canopy, body and crown glittering from the earth to sky,'" he sang, keeping time with his clapping as he moved ahead. "I have been a student of Abdul Karim of Kamrup. I can produce holy ash from thin air, mother! Just say it, and I can turn the two of you into pigeons."

"Can you please go and get us two rickshaws," his mother pleaded. "He has grown old but..."

"Dear Mummy, does a bhand ever grow old? 'Even the moon stares and is embarrassed.'" He made appropriate gestures as he sang. A loo was blowing. The brown leaves floating all around began to circle, along with Gulab.

"Have you gone mad?" a fed up Chameli Begum said as she yawned. She pulled at the strings of a Bhopali bag and took out some lime and tobacco. She had a headache, so rubbed some of the lime on her temples. What misery, what distress. Exhaustion. There was a short distance still to go, under the sun, in the dust, among crowds of mendicants and dry leaves, before she reached the

grave. She went and sat next to her life-partner. God knows which graveyard—Juhu, Byculla, or Nariyalwadi—will it be easier for our dear beloved son to take us to.

Gulab looked at his flashy electronic watch and said to his parents, "Come on, get up, in the name of God, O Ali help us."

The family moved to the bus station. On the way, they saw hordes of pilgrims walking towards Anarkali lake.

11
Discovery of a Cultural Hero

VERY much like the England in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, God's creatures are flowing towards an ancient pilgrimage spot, on foot and other forms of conveyance.

I'm sitting near the lake on the steps of a sacred chabutra writing to you. The twisted branches of a banyan are spread out like the roof of a long, wide hall. Muslims, wearing colourful clothes, walk on pathways between green fields heading towards the blue lake.

Along one of these paths there is a tank, bathing in which, they say, cures leprosy. As in our West (she wrote 'our West' with some hesitation) at Lourdes, probably the water in the Anarkali lake too contains sulphur and is therefore considered sacred for its healing powers.

"Mamu Miyan, you have begun looking partly like Bernard Shaw and partly like Tolstoy. And a little like Maharishi Aurobindo, too," Pinky said cheerily.

"I have a French beard. Maharishi Aurobindo had one like the Chinese."

They had reached the shrine. Feroza put the unfinished letter in her bag. Manek Bai, eager to bathe in the holy water headed towards it, panting. Zarina and Rani Dulhan refused to walk in the sun. They were therefore not part of this group of tourists who now sat on the steps. The host's maid, Zahuran Bua said, "I'm glad you came today. Tomorrow Makna Dev will come and there will be dust all around."

Feroza stared. Have we arrived in fairyland or are we living the tale of *Gul e Bakawali*?

"Makna Dev's dust storm comes every year at this time to clean

up for the wedding of Ghazi Miyan and Zohra Bibi. It's just his duty, no one gets harmed in the storm."

"Arrey yaar, this district is in the valley between two or three rivers, there is always dust here. Makna Dev indeed!" Pinky said quietly and laughed.

"But why at the same time every year, on the day of the wedding? Pinky, the east is mysterious, let it stay mysterious."

"Yes, mysterious, and poor and superstitious. This is what Brian Moreland is going to like," Pinky noted the sharpness in his tone. Parveen Sultan immediately covered up for this. "Why don't all of you listen to the story? Go on Zahuran Bua."

"Begum Sahib, Zohra Bibi of Rudauli was a very beautiful and good woman but the poor thing was blind. And Sayyid Sahib was very handsome. One day, riding on Lilli the mare, he passed by Zohra Bibi's door and asked her for a cup of water. She said, I am blind, how can I get you the water? Gaji Miyan said, go on, go get the water. She brought water from a pot and suddenly she could see. Sayyid Sahib returned to Bahraich and sent her father a message. Bitiya, a man still goes from here to Rudauli every Wednesday." For Zahuran Bua all periods were the same, and the time fixed.

"Tell us about that time."

"The date for the marriage was fixed and then Gaji Miyan was martyred in battle. So, the celebrating groom's party now make fun of the Rudauli people. The Rudauli people in turn ask, why haven't you brought your sister along?"

"Why didn't you bring your sister along. What does that mean?" Feroza asked.

"Outside the shrine in Bahraich, two beds are laid under the mango tree. Juice from the ripe mangoes always falls on them on this day.

"At four in the morning the pundits examine their birth charts and call out that there is a problem. The planets are at war. The wedding is postponed till next year. The same happens here. Pundits from Banaras come and examine the birth charts and at four in the morning, there arises a problem."

"This is why there is the saying about Bale Miyan's wedding—it is always getting postponed. Now you know the meaning of at least one Urdu idiom," Pinky said to Feroza.

They got up to walk to the lake.

On both sides of the mud pathway, colourful ghararas were drying in the sun. "Look, look at that embroidered gharara on that bush," Feroza screamed.

"People wear their best clothes to these places," Pinky said.

They reached the edge of the lake. Far away, hidden in the reeds, women got into the lake with their clothes on. Then, with great expertise, changed their clothes and spread their wet clothes out in the sun to dry. Manek Bai ran towards that end of the lake.

A gentleman along with his wife was walking, carefully stepping on stones in the slush. The wife took off her burqa. "Come soon, the bus is waiting," he said.

Around the beautiful lake there were green fields, their crops waving in the wind. On the surface, around the edge, water-lilies bloomed. "Look at Allah's majesty," Zahuran Bua said. "Gaji Miyan used to sit here and do his ablutions. Drop by drop the water collected and it became a lake." She lifted Manek Bai's bag of clothes and ran after her.

A group of men with sparse beards and wearing waist cloths arrived with their wives who were wearing saris. The women moved towards the reeds.

"Look, Pinky, working-class peasants. Not a single woman, except those who have come from the cities, is wearing a burqa," Shehla said to Pinky. As a lawyer, she had been very agitated by the Shah Bano case.

"Appi, we can do analytical studies all our lives but it will make no difference to the clerics."

Among the new arrivals there was a young man wearing a safari suit.

"He is a weaver from Banaras or Mirzapur," Pinky said to Feroza.

An elderly man with a white beard was telling his companions about his encounter with a pick-pocket.

"First, he cut open my bag with a razor blade. I clutched the bag so he pulled at it harder. I pulled it back. So you see, these people are as tough as me." His companions guffawed in congratulation.

"Waah, waah, Abba, you were great," the man wearing the safari suit said. "You pulled it back from the pick-pocket!" He came towards Vicky Miyan, said "salamalekum" and immediately began to do business. He presented Vicky Miyan with his visiting card and said, "I make rounds of Lucknow twice a year."

"That's amazing," Feroza said to Pinky. "You said he was a weaver from Banaras but he immediately guessed we were from Lucknow."

"Wouldn't I know the difference between Bhojpuri and Awadhi dialects? And do I look as if I'm from Mars that he wouldn't recognise me? You are becoming very thick-skulled, yaar."

"Yaar, she doesn't know the difference between Potohari and Multani," Dinky came to his sister's defence. "If she had been living in Pakistan, she would definitely have known."

The young man glanced at Feroza and Parveen Sultan dressed in Chinese silk shalwar-qameezes and addressed Parveen, "Begum Sahib, shalwar suits, a sharara-suit for the bride, a sherwani for the groom. I have the finest brocades."

A sherwani for Brian, Feroza thought determinedly to herself.

He turned towards Safia, Shehla. Amina, Salima and Mehnaz.

"Bitiya, the finest cotton brocade for this weather…"

When the group from Banaras, along with the young man, had left, Parveen said, "This boy recognised me as being from Pakistan."

"Penny Khala, ladies from Pakistan come here to buy their trousseau all the time."

"These brocade and silk traders…" Vicky Miyan as usual spoke from way beyond, "have travelled the silk route forever and have a world of experience." The most ordinary conversation acquired a learned, philosophical, nay metaphysical, dimension when it involved Vicky Miyan.

Manek Bai returned after a dip in the lake. They got up.

They saw a small brown Imambara atop a little green hillock. Inside was a red tazia.

"The Karbala of us Sunnis." Zahuran Bua informed them.

Numerous tazias, half-buried in the green ground, looked very forlorn.

Vicky Miyan came to a stop. "It's a strange thing," he said, after looking around and a few seconds of silence. "This single red tazia kept inside this brown building. Like the desolate ruins of Mexico. Suddenly, it's the same mysterious atmosphere."

"When are ruins cheerful?" realistic-minded Parveen asked.

"The spirit of the inner manifestations of history is all the same."

"Vicky Bhaiyya, what are these manifestations of the spirit?"

"Ahram, Baalbek, Petra...."

"Don't reduce us to ruins in this sun, let's go, move on!" Parveen chided her older brother lovingly.

A child's clear, fresh voice rose in the green-blue cleansed, seamless silence. He was sitting behind the Imambara rapidly memorising the multiplication table for fifteen, "Four times sixty—five times seventy-five—six times ninety—seven times a hundred and five—eight times a hundred and twenty—nine times a hundred and thirty-five—ten times a hundred and fifty...."

"Aye, Manzoor Bhaiyya, let's go," a woman called from a distance.

"Coming, Mother," he jumped up from the embankment and ran towards the lake, disappearing along with his family, into the greenery of the jungle.

*

"It's a strange path and a strange garden," Pinky kept humming. The three young men climbed down the rococo shrine housing the footprint of the Prophet from the time of Shujaud Daulah. The two cousins were bare-headed while the Zoroastrian Framroze had a handkerchief tied around his head. They saw uncle and niece walking along a mud path.

The three wished Vicky when they got close. "It's a strange path," Pinky hummed again. "Mamu Miyan, yesterday I heard someone sing this from one of the tents in a distance. Since yesterday

we have been searching for Fali's mysterious East. Perhaps we might even find a motif for Shaikh Tahir Ali's Rose House here. There are buildings from Tughlaq times right up to the time of John Company."

The five of them moved towards a deep stambh. The sun was setting.

"There are such towers in jungles and fields," Pinky continued, "and it is said that they are military towers used in jihad-wars, built by Bibi Zohra as memorials after Ghazi Miyan's martyrdom. Another version says that they were built by the department of survey of the East India Company for surveying land. The latter sounds more likely to me though mysteries are born from such legends."

"Some mysteries are real, my friend," Fali said. "Look at the old temples and monasteries of Bengal. Those are solid mysteries—the unknown ecstasy that is not only felt but can be seen, too. Solid. It is not there in Mughal buildings but is found in buildings of the Sultanate period. Is it only time that creates the mystery?"

"Mamu Miyan, what is that elusive element that distinguishes the inner vision of one school of artists and architects from another?"asked Pinky."Is it racial memory and national temperament, or is it just geography and local culture?"

"Uncle Vicky what is that thing, that extra something, that European and Russian artists bring to illustrations of children's fairy tales? Is it only their creative imagination? Mummy says that along the river in Brindaban there are jhau trees. On moonlit nights, those who want to, can hear a flute playing in the distance."

"Fali, too, is a goner. How long could he remain unaffected by his mother?" Dinky whispered to Pinky.

They saw Safia. As usual, she was apart from the rest of the group, sitting in solitude under a tree.

"Safia, can we sit here?" Vicky Miyan asked her gently.

She nodded, draped her dupatta over her disabled hand and shifted slightly.

Vicky felt very sad. As if he was the author of an arcane book,

sitting in the shade of a tree like an ancient sage, giving a discourse on some Upanishad.

"In the reign of Firuz Shah Tughlaq," the teacher began, "a great saint called Mir Muhammad Mah, perhaps built himself a hut and lived at this very spot."

"Strange is this path, and strange this garden," Pinky began to hum again.

"Yesterday, Rana Sahib told me this strange story. The mother of Firuz Tughlaq had prayed for a boon: if Firuz Shah returned victorious from the war in Thatta...."

Thatta? Feroza pricked up her ears. How is Thatta connected to this garden in Bahraich?

"Jam Feroz, the ruler of Thatta, allied with Sultan Firuz. A great battle took place. The victorious Sultan came here to offer thanks and met Mir Muhammad Mah, God's grace be upon him. When Rana Sahib was telling me this story I thought of Jam Feroz the ruler of Thatta, and of Jam Tamachi, the Prince of Sindh, who fell in love with a fisherwoman called Noorie. Sursamundari, an ocean of stories...

"The events of Firuz Shah's times...tales....

"And romance conflicts with romance...bloodshed even then..." Vicky Miyan suddenly fell silent.

"Jam Sahib of Nawanagar was a famous cricket player, wasn't he?" Feroza's voice broke the silence.

Pinky was amused. "Your questions are priceless."

"You haven't completed the story about Mir Muhammad Mah and Sultan Firuz Shah," Dinky reminded Vicky Miyan.

"It was about miracles. That's outside the world view of you people..."

Sunset. In the dim light of the sun's rays the shrine gleamed for a few more minutes. Vicky Miyan said, "The tone of a place where there has been constant worship for centuries, changes. Aldous Huxley has called this white magic. Isn't this place like an island of silence?"

"The fair grounds are some distance away and people hardly come here," Vicky whispered to Dinky.

Fali, with a handkerchief on his head, was listening intently.

"The shrines of the old mosques and the footprint of the Prophet..." Vicky Miyan kept speaking. "The town itself has a strange feeling within it. Like a fairy tale. Ancient shadows surrounded by trees and green fields—worshippers sitting inside on cold, colourful mats, the blue lake, the rustling branches of khirni and maulsari trees above, like watery reflections of the imagination on the Sheesha Pani river."

"Sheesha Pani!" Pinky looked at his watch. "Shall we go there tonight itself?"

"These rootless, illiterate people," Mamu gestured towards the fair, "touch only the concealed surface."

"Do I also touch it, Uncle?" Fali asked eagerly.

"Why have we lost our connection?" Feroza asked.

"Not completely. I'm convinced that your rowdy generation can, momentarily at least, feel a connection to the universe."

"Definitely in terms of identity. Maybe due to creative thinking. But not, I'm afraid through what you would call rapture or discernment!!" Feroza answered, and began looking at an ant crawling on a mango leaf. In the adjoining grounds, the entertainment centres began to dazzle. Circus and carnival tents, the caravans of conjurers, the encampments of entertainers.

"Shankar Shambhu, the qawwals," came a voice from behind a tent wall, "Khalifaji...."

"Yes, Khan Sahib—keep talking—"

"The two were young boys then. I saw their mimicry of Laila-Majnu right here."

"Khan Sahib, first a man's time flies away like a pigeon. Then the man himself." His huqqa gurgled.

"Khan Sahib."

"Yes, Khalifah."

"Yesterday evening, a gentleman from Bombay landed up in his house-car."

"It's called a caravan, Khalifaji."

"Yes, yes, the very same."

"The Nawab Sahib of Gurhbhaili saw the show, *Ankh ka Nasha*, and so pleased was he that he gifted one to Abba. My late Abba said to him that for this palace on wheels, there should be a palatial garage, and if there is a garage then there should be a bungalow...

"The Nawab Sahib said to my father, Hafiz Chidda, continue to keep me entertained and you will get that, too."

"Khan Sahib, stop telling tales."

"I'm talking about the time when His Highness had three houses next to each other, in which lived the three he was enamoured of at the time—Naseem Bano, Dinar Akhtar and Kitty, the Anglo-Indian from Calcutta."

"Khan Sahib, the night has passed, so has the era."

"Khalifaji, I too had a great time. With Abba, God bless him, I went in this caravan right up to Lahore. There, on the banks of the Ravi, we camped on one side and across was the Jahan Ara Company with the lustrous Kajjan. On the caravan Abba had painted in English, *Dil Farosh Theatres, Doon Valley*. When our fortunes changed, we had to sell it."

"But listen to what happened, Khan Sahib. That poor gentleman came here looking for a wailing couple and instead ran into the gadabout, Lado. She got after him pleading with him to give her a chance, to take her with him. He refused but he did leave his card with her."

The huqqa gurgled.

"The Chisti Sufis have a saying—today, tomorrow, the day after, fly away dragon fly, the monsoon is here. Khan Sahib, if Lado flies, your ship is sunk."

Returning from the shrine of the Prophet's footprint, Feroza passed by the tent wall and said, "The Dil Farosh Drama Company! How cute!!"

*

They were busy picnicking and hunting on the banks of the Sheesha Pani, a tributary of the river Rapti on the border of Nepal, when a white caravan car sparkled among the green trees.

"Vijay Mata Foundation, San Fernando Valley," Dinky took off his sunglasses and read aloud.

Speaking an obscure language, some Lamas appeared and busied themselves putting up nice imported tents. Then appeared a smart business executive-looking man, then a celestial beauty wearing a saffron coloured, old-style Roman toga. She was tall with an expressionless face, as though she was a model from Rome. She dipped one foot in the river, then sat on a rock and immediately assumed the *lalitasana.*

With the naughty curiosity of college kids, the two cousins began to stroll at some distance.

At the other end, Fali Dhondy, having finished with fishing, had met the new arrivals. He returned very pleased. "Can you believe it, there is a Red Indian Lama in that group."

Vicky returned after photographing the flowers. The well-dressed dandy walked up to him. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said, and like the cloth vendor from Banaras, proffered his business card.

Ibn e Bahar, Public Relations, Advertisers
Bahar Advertising, Fort, Bombay

Vicky smiled. "Mashallah!"

The young man smiled broadly, "Asalamalekum!" and shook Vicky's hand with both hands.

"From the banks of the ocean to this great height, and from such a distance! Is your father well?"

The young man was confused.

"If it hadn't been thirty years ago, I would have thought it was Bahar Sahib himself who had appeared. Mashallah, he is now a media personality. I have only met him once and that too fleetingly." He did not think it appropriate to mention Bobby's wedding reception.

The young man caught on immediately. "Yes," he answered plainly and simply. "He was then the badly off manager and song-writer of the Sanobar Film Company. He often mentions that memorable celebration."

Vicky Miyan was impressed by the stranger's acknowledgement.

There were few people who, after a drastic change of fortune, did not avoid looking at old acquaintances in the eye.

The servants laid out the food. The ladies who had wandered off in different directions were summoned back. Pinky introduced Ibn e Bahar to them.

He was an eloquent man and had chosen an extremely appropriate profession for himself.

Throughout the meal he kept talking. "There must be seekhpar, sheeshpar, surkhabs here. If only I could find the feather of a small surkhab, I would take it with me. I would make it the logo of my company to go with the slogan, 'Give us a chance to serve you—it will be a surkhab feather in your cap.'

"Raja Sahib, the world of advertising is a strange world. Last year I went with my father into an Indian restaurant in a big European city. At the door itself there were figures of Radha, Krishna, Shiva, Parvati, Ganeshji.

"The owner turned out to be a young NRP. I gestured towards the pictures and he said 'public relations', as there was a majority of Hindus in the city.

"Seeing my astonishment my father said, son, you should know that ideological bigotry is confined to those wise ones who are still living in their country. Abroad, in order to earn money and to compete with the whites, the interests of the NRPs and NRIs are almost the same. Except at the time of cricket matches when they turn into huge mobs and regress to their primitive tribal instincts and start abusing each other."

"Are you connected to this foundation, too?" Fali asked.

"No. I'm only involved with non-film show business, classical dance, etc. But my father said, son, all my life I have earned my living from Urdu, so please do something for Urdu, too. We Urdu writers who are connected to films do not need any extra fame. However, those writers and poets who are not connected to the film industry, when they publicise themselves, they do so in crude ways. In any case most of them don't have the money, and if they do—is that trout? wah—wah—

"He suggested I add a small department to my company and employ people who write in Urdu, at appropriate wages, because he had earned so much from Urdu.

"Therefore, to please my father, I employed an Urdu copywriter who had been writing jingles for Vividh Bharati. I made him do original write-ups instead of articles wrapped in jargon. We made a list of a few chosen Urdu writers with the intention of sending the write-ups to them. Then it occurred to me to prepare some obituaries to be used when needed, and these were kept safely in the office. In the meantime, I had to go out so I told this promising young man that I was leaving one write-up as an example of how obituaries should not be written.

> The departed soul in his being was an institution and the void that has been left by his untimely death is going to be hard to fill particularly now when poor Urdu is facing such difficult times. It is therefore necessary to examine all of the late writer's prose/poetry/critical achievements in depth so that his real literary position, etc.

"I left that piece of paper on the copywriter's desk and went to the airport. He didn't come into the office the next day and a Gujarati peon put the paper in the Out tray. A Marathi despatch clerk then made photocopies of it and posted it to the people in the list that we had given him.

"The Urdu section thus sank even before it started. And the mail we got in response referred to me as the son of Noah." Ibn e Bahar breathed a deep sigh.

His audience broke out laughing.

"How did you turn up here?" Pinky asked.

"My father is in Scotland. There he heard about the decision on the Red Rose case. He said that he was told over the phone that Masterji was in Lucknow, with no friends or assistance. He told me to leave immediately and bring him back by air to Bombay."

"What a loyal friend!" Vicky Miyan commented.

"I reached the place he was staying at in Lucknow and learnt that he had gone to Bahraich."

"But what is the scene with this Vijay Mata?" Pinky asked, deeply interested.

"She was staying at the same hotel as me in Lucknow. She has come here looking for a treasure."

"What do you mean?"

"Her orange dress was designed in Paris and a French hairdresser is part of her staff. Three well-known European musicians have composed spiritual odes in her honour.

"In brief, she is doing very well for herself but she said she is not at peace. I said, she was helping others find spiritual solace, but how come she was restless herself? She said she hadn't found the treasure.

"I thought she was talking in spiritual terms so I told her she was sure to find it one day. After all, she was still young.

"Mirza Sahib, my globe-trotting father once met a shaikh at the shrine of John the Baptist in Asia Minor...."

"Bahar Sahib, we were talking about Vijay Mata...."

"Yes. So she told me that she was the only daughter of her parents. Her father, a revenue official, was a simple, orthodox Hindu. When she was in school her father was transferred to a semi mountainous region where an old ruined house had been standing empty for a while. They took possession of it because there was no claimant for these ruins."

Vicky started. "What was this hilly town called?"

"She avoided telling me that. She is a lady who likes to keep secrets, and tantric Buddhism has unfathomable secrets. So this family started living in the ruined house. Nothing extraordinary like the appearance of ghosts or spirits occurred. However, some local residents told them that there was a treasure buried under a tree in the courtyard.

"The Muslim necromancers of the Terai, who are considered experts at finding buried treasures, said that an ogre lived on this tree."

"What's an ughar?" Dinky asked Pinky in a whisper.

"And that the pot holding the treasure is guarded by a sesh nag—the king of serpents."

Feroza shivered.

"After her parent's death she decided that she had to find the treasure, no matter what it took. She met those who claimed to know about ancient sorceresses like Dahiwali and Luna. She went to the black magic hill of Kamrup in Assam and then to Bengal and then to the tantric mystical ceremonies of Tibet. But she says she always missed the clues by a whisker. Therefore, she too became an NRI.

"She said to me, Son of Spring, we are living in an age where every impossibility has become possible. An Arab billionaire chants Om Namoh Shivay, Madam Jahan Sadat eulogises the Brahmakumaris, and Russians, wearing sacred marks on their forehead, are walking the streets of Moscow singing 'Hare Rama Hare Krishna'. Is there anything that is impossible? Once I find the treasure I will propagate the worship of Tara Devi all over the world. I said to her, with no interest in this absurd claim, suppose this treasure is there and you get your hands on it, according to law the government will appropriate it.

"She ignored what I said as if it was of no relevance. To her everything in this world is irrelevant. She said, 'What is Moscow, Spring Kumar? Right now no religious activity is allowed in Albania. I will go to Tirana and show you.'"

"You mean, first the treasure, and then off to Tirana?"

"I said, Hail, Mataji. I too have set out to look for an unseen, lost treasure—an old, homeless, fragile, demoralised couple. I'm going to Bahraich, so come with me. First you can pay your respects to the saint and then go into the jungles of the Terai and search for the diviner who can help you. So I came to Bahraich Sharif with her in her moving home. I searched the Fair and had announcements made on the public address system. Then I met a pretty young lady who looked like Sridevi and who was called Lado Telan."

His listeners were astonished.

"Once, when he was thinking of floating the Sanobar and Video TV Films my father would have waved his magic wand and made Lado the oil-presser's daughter into Lila Telgaonkar. But I have

a feeling he is tired now and is resting in the homes of his Urdu patrons in Glasgow.

"The girl from the theatre said, who knows which bus that family took and where they have gone. Who keeps track of people in these crowds and who cares?" Ibn e Bahar fell silent.

After lunch they proceeded to the river to wash their hands. Suddenly, they were all sad and no one wanted to speak to anyone.

"What pleasant, cool water this is," Ibn e Bahar said a little while later, as he felt the water with his hands.

Vicky Miyan picked up some mud and said, "Yes, the water and earth of this place are different. And look at this Sheesha Pani river, it's so clear and transparent that if a needle were dropped into it, we would be able to see it."

"Raja Sahib, those two were also like this river, pure and transparent. I do not know why, but my heart tells me they are no longer alive."

The musical water of the river continued to flow. The birds were circling above.

There are red munias where you live, and red crested pochards, Chandni, isn't it?

And the scent of wild roses permeates the air?

And, Chandni Begum—Vicky Miyan bent towards the river and addressed the flowing water—was it your deserted house that became the possession of Vijay Mata? And that empty treasure that no one has yet found nor will ever find?

Was that your house?

A yellow butterfly flew and sat on a branch and seemed to answer him. There are scores of towns in this area and countless old houses. Empty your mind of unnecessary and irrelevant ideas. Even if that was Chandni's house, so what?

On the wet sand he wrote with his finger—The lowly being, Waqar Hussain,who is still among the living. I, too, happened to come this way one day.

Then he looked around at the greenery that surrounded him

and called out in a loud voice. "This is a page in the wilderness which has been written in a flowery script." No one understood what he was saying.

*

The third day.

Their host, a former Rani Sahib, wearing a black burqa, was walking gracefully along with them. The groom's-parties were sitting under the mango trees, laughing and chatting. Some were bathing at the well. The qawwals were singing in the shade of a jamun tree. Vicky Miyans's sons, Tony, Bunny and Jimmy, were by now tired of taking photographs.

Emerging from the crowd, Vicky Miyan, Dinky and Pinky walked ahead of the rest.

"Dinky stands out from the rest, mashallah," Parveen said to her daughter. "Tall, well-to-do."

"Ammi," Feroza said indignantly but under her breath. "You have said this repeatedly. Don't go on saying 'well-to-do'. Pinky isn't starving, is he? And wouldn't Dinky stand out in his national dress?"

"Just look at this throng—dark, tiny and misshapen."

"Ammi, please don't talk like that. People of the east are usually dark and small in stature. You used to mock Bengalis too. You yourself, are you of the master race?" She moved ahead angrily and went and sat on the edge of a chabutra.

She says things without rhyme or reason. What harm have these people done to her?

Vicky Miyan came and stood close to her. "So, you're sitting here. I heard you talking about the master race."

"If I told Ammi she was a racist, she would never believe me."

He sat down on the edge of the chabutra and wiped the sweat on his face.

"What is it here—master caste?" Feroza asked.

Vicky Miyan smiled. "You are becoming very intelligent and wise!"

"Pinky thinks I'm stupid."

Pinky on the one hand, Brian on the other—this poor girl is in a real fix.

Mrs Dhondy, flustered and carrying a suitcase, passed by them.

"Look, there goes the Persian lady. They were the master race, ruling all the way up to Greece. Greater than…."

"Yes?"

"And Ghazi Miyan's uncle commissioned Firdausi."

"Yes."

"Do you remember our Atu? Ilaichi Khanum? She was a Lodi, and they were—mighty Pathans."

A small groom's-party passed by, singing.

"But look, Ghazi Miyan, this friend of God, belonged to no master race."

"We, in our brief lives trouble each other so much. If possible, we even destroy each other. What sort of people were these? For centuries they have been giving people a chance at happiness because there were such few opportunities for it in their lives."

"Ammi was saying this business about Ghazi Miyan's marriage to Zohra Bibi is a biddat, a damnable religious innovation."

"A religious innovation! How many poor people have been able to trade at this Fair? This is an agricultural fair. The summer crop has been harvested and the peasant has money to buy things."

"Bade Mamu, these people with their tiny shops look so cute."

Some Hindu pilgrims approached, crawling on their stomachs.

Men and women were coming from all directions carrying lances and flags. Elephants and horses were embroidered on the pennants and tufts of hair on the lances. Young Emperor, help us, they were calling out as they danced to the beating drums.

"These people have walked all the way from their villages, as far as Bihar," Vicky said. "Similar fairs are held in thirty-two districts of Uttar Pradesh. How come there are so many tombs and shrines to Ghazi Miyan everywhere?"

A dervish-like character appeared—long hair, a beard and wearing colourful prayer beads. For Feroza this, too, was a wondrous

sight because he had approached them speaking a clear Oxford-accented English.

"Actually, the thing is," he tossed some tobacco into his mouth. "Aurangzeb sent an army to wipe out this biddat. It laid siege to the shrine but the people took the bricks lying outside the enclosure and built shrines elsewhere with them. They began holding fairs there. Sikandar Lodi, too, tried to close this fair down."

"Such strong faith? And most of these people are Hindus. Wasn't Ghazi Miyan a holy warr...?

"Young lady, these matters are beyond your comprehension," he smiled.

"This is the problem with you people. Instead of answering any of my questions sensibly, you always unnecessarily bring in the mysterious into it," Feroza reacted sharply. Vicky raised his eyebrow, trying to tell her to stop.

"The thing is," the sage-like man said calmly, "the people who were beneficiaries of the young saint's grace and were unhappy with their local leaders probably arrived to save the shrine but came too late. So they left their lances and pennants at the spot where the defenders had been martyred and returned home. Since then these pennants and lances—the saint was an Alavi Sayyid from the tribe of Muhammad bin Abu Hanifa. He was closely linked to the martial traditions."

"Right—I understand, sir—the holy warrior fighting against tyranny like St. George the dragon-killer, national symbol of England. But this—looks like Margaret Thatcher arriving with offerings of flowers and sweets."

"Your entire attitude is completely Eurocentric," Vicky was very amused.

"Come this way, let's go and sit in the cool shade of the tamarind tree," the new arrival guided Vicky, Feroza and Safia towards the tree.

"Don't argue with him," Vicky said softly to Feroza, "he is an educated man."

The man heard this. He squatted on the platform, began

smoking a cigarette through his clenched fist and said, "She is a child, let her argue. Yes, and look at the stone ring, it is the earring of Ghazi Miyan's branded-slave, Makna Dev."

Feroza was aghast. "You can't be serious."

He ignored the girl and continued to speak to the uncle. "And Bhai Sahib, speaking of slavery, let me tell you. Once, returning from England, I reached Konya after travelling through Yugoslavia, etc. Purely as a tourist. Two English classmates of mine were with me. There I met an old dervish. He told me a touching prayer-wish about the stone that they use in their rituals. He said, wear this stone in your ear to indicate that you are the groom-slave of Qambar, the groom-slave of Ali."

"Glory be to Allah—" Vicky Miyan said rapturously.

Worried, Feroza looked at Safia who looked indifferent.

"Let us hear more..."

"You were saying..."

"I have turned into Qambar the slave by just being with your horse."

"Wah!"

"Ali is my Imam, and I am...."

"The slave of Ali—" Vicky Miyan responded.

The newcomer ran to one side, then returned.

"I'll recite a paen that has been recited since the time of Iltutmish—a rajaz."

Ilutitmish—Firuz Shah—Shujaud Daulah—these figures are still real to these people. Feroza's indefinable fear and amazement continued to grow. He raised his right hand and mumbled—"The sword of heaven is formless—there are infinite descendants of Ali, listen brother to another old noha which is recited till today."

"Please go ahead..."

When Qasim went to war, demons were chased away
Not a step did he retreat
His body slashed with swords, his turban cut to shreds
That looked like strands of flowers, hung on his fair face
Like ceaseless monsoon rain, the arrows rained on him.

The limbs of his companions fell in pieces on the ground
He went around in a circle and then headed one way.

"Mamujan, everyone here speaks strangely."

"Strangely? Not at all. Rana Sahib, before 1952, was a well known Raja, educated at Oxford. Now he has joined the brotherhood of mystics."

"Does he have a lot of spare time?"

"Yes, like me."

His niece was embarrassed.

A bunch of noisy mendicants belonging to the Rifa'i order passed through the courtyard raising slogans hailing Maula Ali. These faqirs were from the Rifa'i order based in Badaun, Hussain Tekri in Madhya Pradesh and Devarya in Maharashtra.

Rana Sahib reappeared.

"This Rifa'i order no longer exists in Turkey and Transoxiana but they survive here!"

"Because there were revolutions there long ago and there hasn't been, nor is there likely to be, one here," Feroza snapped.

"These people are the secret police of the saints," the Rana Sahib retorted. "They are the keepers of their shrines, patient, restrained people, but these ascetics are known to be rough on rude and disrespectful people."

Feroza pleaded with her uncle. "Shall we go now?" She appeared very agitated.

This poor girl has been deeply disturbed by Parveen's racism. Suddenly she has become aware that racism has many forms. If her Moreland progeny looks down upon its Asian roots, this prejudice too will be a part of their roots.

Chamm... How many light years away is the West from this summer fair? It takes millions of light years for the light of the stars to reach the earth. The light and darkness of previous epochs arrive here simultaneously. Suddenly, Rana Sahib began to sing in earnest.

I went to the Indus
To drink water

In the river lived an alligator
Which caught my leg and pulled me in
Hey Krishna, protect me.

"Tukaram?" Vicky asked.

"No, Sant Rai Das. 'Protect me because my life is lost' from the sixteenth century. This faqir heard it in Pondicherry from D.K. Rai himself."

"Oh, the great singer-mystic. Dilip Kumar Rai," Vicky said.

"In the sixteenth century you…?" Feroza repeated. Everything is possible, these people are crazy. Wearily, she yawned. What am I doing here?

"People went to drink water but the crocodile ate them up, sad," Vicky Miyan said loudly.

Where had they gone to drink water? In the hot summer afternoon, she felt sleepy.

Faraway, a cuckoo called—kahaan, kahaan—where? A lapwing screamed al atash, thirst. Feroza rubbed her eyes.

"You sing in the Marathi style," Vicky Miyan commented.

"I am a student of Principal Ratanjankar."

"I went to drink water. I stepped into the river of life and a crocodile pulled me in," Vicky Miyan answered.

What a strange thing to say! Feroza opened her eyes wide to dispel her drowsiness. In Karachi and London people wouldn't believe that just a few days ago she had been in such an incredible place.

She looked around and picked up a wood apple.

"Arrey, Chhoti Khala, look at this fruit—the size of a cricket ball."

"Baale Emperor, help me," a hill mynah called out. Its meek looking owner had left the cage on the platform and gone towards the tap to perform his ablutions.

Pinky and Dinky arrived and sat down on a small wall.

"Where had you two loafers disappeared?" Vicky asked affectionately.

"We went to call on Nawab Muzaffar Jung."

"…?"

"We were trying to figure out how Nawab Sahib and Sir Elijah Impey could help Mr Zafrul Islam sneak into Denmark."

"....??"

"We were sitting with Professor Abdul Karim, the magician," Dinky elaborated.

"....???"

"Professor Abdul Karim, Baji Kor. The world-famous magician of Kamrup, Gold Medalist," Pinky completed the introduction.

"We met a Bangladeshi at his camp who was selling lungis and hankies who, on seeing us, immediately took out some paintings of the Murshidabad and Company School from his bag. One painting was wonderful. It had the seals of both Nawab Muzaffar Jung and Sir Elijah Impey. The man said that he wanted to go to Europe with his wife and children. Two of his brothers were already in Oslo. First they had gone to Britain as illegal immigrants. From there, along with some Pakistani illegal immigrants, they got onto what sounds like a Viking boat and landed on the shores of Norway."

"Wah!

For the interpretation—now who shall I ask?
In last night's dream I saw myself on Noah's ark.

"Now Mr Zafarul Islam wants to do the same and is trying to arrange the money. He is still short of five thousand rupees. He wants to go to Denmark or Sweden because they have humanist governments. He is an educated man. I asked him if he was going to take political asylum there. He said that wouldn't be a problem because every Bengali is born a revolutionary."

"I am fascinated by the painting of Muhammad Raza Khan Muzaffar Jung, the Deputy Governor of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. On a bright moonlit night, he is sitting all alone in front of a white pavilion smoking a huqqa—alone and lonely in the post-Plassey ambiguities of history—

"A dark night, a silent platform, Bengal descending into darkness. He is lying inside the satchel of a homeless Bangladesi waiting for a buyer who doesn't even know who he was. Ibn e Bahar

went back without anyone knowing he was here or he could have arranged for all these paintings to be sold in Bombay. I have told Zafrul Bhai to come to Rani Sahib's place in the evening. Bade Mamu, please buy one or two. He appears to be really in need."

"Love, my new pain. Don't bother me anymore. I will buy them. Why are the two of you sitting like Humpty Dumpty on the wall? Come here and sit in the shade."

Rana Sahib returned.

"He was telling us about Ghazi Miyan. So he arrived in Bahraich!"

"Bade Mamu, the Victorians claimed that Ghazi Miyan's battles were half-fiction."

Rana Sahib again squatted with the majesty of an ascetic, put a cigarette in his fist, smiled and said, "Now for the sake of you youngsters who are suspended between the East and West, I will tell you in modern phraseology what this is all about." He took a long puff of his cigarette. "This is a great play, a Symbolist one. According to folk poetry, at the time of Ghazi Miyan's birth, his mother gets Brahmans to draw up his horoscope. A Ghaznavide mother and Brahman scriptures? Like the great Spanish warrior who fought against the Muslims came to be known as El Cid among the Christians? The Sayyid?

"The believers came with reinforcements but they arrived late. He was a Muslim saint otherwise it would have become theatre. His extraordinary mare is recreated. Every year his marriage is postponed because the time is not right. There is so much we want to do but cannot because the time is not right. We leave our plans for a future date which never arrives. It is an illusionary fable which our people created eight or nine centuries ago." He took another puff.

"Baale Miyan is a cultural hero," he addressed Feroza. "A saint of the urban age. In the spring fair, mango blossoms and ears of wheat are offered and peasants donate a part of their yearly earnings to the collection box. The thing is that Aurangzeb was a man with a modern mind—anti-mystery...."

"Now, Bibi, you better inform Brian that you have discovered

a cultural hero in a north Indian fair," Pinky said softly. Irritated, she flung the cricket-ball sized wood apple far away.

"Baale—Baale," the mynah called. "The emperor—the emperor."

Rana Sahib tried to interpret this for her. "She is trying to tell you that Muhammad bin Tughlaq, along with Ibn Battuta, probably sat at this very spot. At that time the entrance to the tomb was so small and the crowds so large that both the emperor and the globe-trotter could not enter."

"Help—help," the mynah completed its sentence. Rana kept interpreting what the bird was saying. "Muhammad bin Tughlaq gave the shrine a huge grant—so huge that a few new administrative divisions had to be created."

"Revenue-free grants?" asked Pinky. "Arrey, who knows, the sage that our poor ancestor gave the three cups of barley meal to might have been associated with some such shrine."

"The magical times," Feroza said.

"Yes, magical. You go to sleep as a nobody and you get up and find yourself a minister and you don't have to worry about your next seven generations," Pinky answered.

Mrs Dhondy, Zarina, Fali and Mehnaz approached the tamarind tree. Zahuran Bua was carrying a basket on her head.

"Remove poverty," the mynah screamed. Everyone broke into laughter. The meek man returned after saying his prayers. He looked apologetically at the group of affluent people.

"Who taught him that?" Pinky asked with a smile.

"Sir, my son has joined the Youth Congress," he wished them, then disappeared into the crowd.

Zahuran Bua left the basket deferentially on the platform. "Remove poverty! Arrey, can anyone interfere with the working of God's schemes?"she said to Feroza. "Three of my relatives have gone to Saudi. My son sold his land, mortgaged his wives' jewellery and gave the money to an agent and the agent disappeared," she said, her voice hoarse. She dried her tears with her dupatta, and sat down on the hot cement floor. "Poverty is my fate."

"What! Bua?"

"The Prophet once prayed to Allah: let not even one of my people be poor. His prayer was granted. Then it rained heavily. Water began to pour through the roofs. Who was there to repair them? All the labourers had disappeared because everyone was now rich. People then went to the Prophet and asked him to pray that some people be made poor again. And he prayed again."

Vicky Miyan reacted sharply. "Who told you this?"

"The cleric said this in his sermon on the Prophet's birthday."

"Where is that cleric? Bring him to me," Vicky thundered.

Zahuran Bua was flustered. "Hujoor, he lives in the village."

"Vicky—Vicky—please don't get angry," Manek Bai pleaded. "Look at the fantastic things I have bought from the potters." She took out three small bundles from the basket and unwrapped the pink paper.

"Look at this, the Holy Ka'ba …!"

"Aha—why not the entire sanctuary of clay?"

"And this, the tomb of the Holy Prophet.

"And this, a houri from paradise. Completely outside of this world." (She meant out of this world.) She took out a head made of clay and put it on the platform. It was the face of a beautiful woman. A ring in her nose and golden ornaments in her hair. On her head was the Iranian style crown of the rulers of Awadh, and wonder in her eyes.

In her mare-like pointed ears there were earrings.

"The Duldul buraq, the Prophet's horse," Manek Bai informed him. "Muharram is approaching so the potters have already made these. From the same mould that they used in royal times."

"A big hall. Outside, luxuriant greenery and heavy rain. Playing drums, the weavers of the village brought their tazias to the gate. They sent a paper horse decorated with tinsel inside the gate. Around its neck there was a picture resembling this—it was exactly the same."

Safia had emerged from her silence under the influence of some strange force. Vicky encouraged her. "Yes, I too remember it well. It was the house of Badi Phuphi where we were visiting."

"All of us. We were very young, weren't we?"

"Yes, yes, not that we are that old now, Safia. Listen, you have no reason to fear these young men. These people too are justified in their own way."

"Yes, Bhaiyya, it resembled this exactly. And I had screamed, a tomb that looks like a fairy! Batashan Bua said, no, this is the Duldul horse. It used to be a houri in paradise who wept for a thousand years, she wanted to carry the Prophet at the time of his ascension. Allah granted her wish."

"Yes, and it was raining and there was a jungle all around. The wet eastern wind wafted into the hall and the reflection of the glittering buraq on the shiny green floor looked as if the jungle, and paradise itself, had come into the room."

"Is that so, Bhaiyya?" Safia asked like a small child. She no longer trusted herself or her memory, she wanted her older brother who was definitely more sagacious than the others to confirm it.

"Yes, Safia, yes," he said gently. "Once the rain stopped, they left, singing Muharram dirges in the raga jogiya."

Brother, my boat lies in the middle of the stream
Lord take us across for our boatman has gone.

"Brother, my boat..." Safia repeated and fell silent. Then she said, "No, it wasn't this. It was some other one—" She bent her head and rubbed her forehead with a finger.

Beloved son, twelve years old, held the sheet, hai
I slept on the forest floor, hai re hai
Hai hai, the rider on the Duldul horse, hai hai.

Like a mongoose that sticks its head out of a hole in a tree then suddenly draws back, Safia too withdrew into her shell.

She had written a paper on *Canterbury Tales* at Sarah Lawrence. Did those characters resemble these characters? Somewhat? Uncle Vicky and Rana Sahib, Knight Franklin and Geoffrey Chaucer? Pinky—the Squire? Badi Khala—Madam Eglantine? Mrs Dhondy—Wife of Bath? Chhoti Khala—the Second Nun—

no—that comparison is wrong. And most of these people are not even pilgrims. For some reason or the other they have just lost their faith.

The group left. They called out to Feroza.

Inside the shrine, Mrs Dhondy and Fali got busy making their offering.

"On the eleventh day of Muharram she even goes to Khairabad on a pilgrimage to see the tazia built of fifty-two sticks. Once she took me with her," Pinky laughed as he told Feroza about it. "She said watch, the tazia will start dancing on its own. Hundreds of people were carrying it and suddenly they started going around in circles at great speed. To me, it looked like the green and pleasant grounds of English county cricket. And a huge crowd of thousands of well-dressed people—and the dancing fifty-two-stick tazia."

The older aunt Zarina joined in their conversation. "There used to be competitions among the landowners over these tazias. The tallest one would lead the procession. Now even weavers and butchers have the money so they are competing over building the tallest one."

Butchers, weavers! So now another racist has entered the fray. Feroza angrily moved to one side. Fali, with a handkerchief tied on his head, was saying, "Mummy goes with a full agenda to the holy shrine in Ajmer—a nice Parsi groom from Kanpur or Allahabad for Mehnaz. A groom from Bombay won't do. For me, a nice Parsi wife from Bombay will be fine, but not an Iranian from Yezd."

"Look at that, Bhaiyya, near the sacred cenotaph—a sandalwood tree."

"Yes, Zahuran Bua," Pinky said, then got lost in thought. Then he said, "Bade Mamu, I've just had a brainwave."

"Tell me about it."

"Mysore sandalwood; why don't we get Tony involved in this business?"

"That is a good idea. Praise God, you really have a business-like mind." Rana Sahib smiled too.

"In college, Indian history was one of my subjects," Pinky said

to Rana Sahib. "Studying it was a chore. It is through history that I discovered architecture and became an architect. What can I do? Fali?"

"Yes boss?"

"Did you see the sandalwood tree?"

He thought about it for a moment, then beamed. "Jolly good!"

"If we could find a partner from Karnataka"

"A north Indian will do, too."

"And Tony Miyan can be the manager. Now the problem, Rana Sahib, is that you can't smoke a cigarette properly by holding it in your fist. And this dress of yours—seems to be an escape from reality. Hope you'll forgive me for saying this."

Rana Sahib put his hand on Pinky's head. "Bhai Sahib, mashallah, your nephew is very intelligent."

In the treasury where the offerings were stored, Vicky Miyan began to look at manuscripts of the Quran. "This is the waistcoat of Ghazi Miyan and this, a cover for the Quran," a keeper of the storehouse told him. "Firuz Shah Tughlaq had this quilted cover made as a replacement for when the cover of the Quran became too old. The quilted cover has deteriorated but the cover of the Quran is still as it was."

"Why don't miracles happen nowadays?" Feroza insisted.

"Ask Bade Mamu?" Dinky said.

Vicky Miyan had already gone ahead.

At the gate of the armory, guards with shields, swords and break-action guns were standing guard.

"Yaar Pinky, once at the shrine of Bari Imam in Rawalpindi I saw very strange young malangs wearing red clothes. They had gold rings in their noses and sitars in their hands. They had green eyes and appeared totally calm. They came quietly from one side of the mountains and left after a minute. If they were to come here, pilgrims at this fair wouldn't be amazed in the way we are amazed. Is it natural to be surprised at things we haven't experienced? Do you want people to react calmly and in the same way to all the customs of the world?"

"Vicky Mamu is somewhat—calm. He can wear red clothes and carry a sitar."

Coming out of the shrine, Parveen heaved a huge sigh. "I had heard that at Indian shrines, beggars take you to be a rich Pakistani and crowd around you. Finally, I've experienced it. All the beggars seem to be chasing just Dinky and me."

"Khala, there are beggars at your shrines, too," Shehla pointed out meekly.

"Not so many," her aunt replied.

"God save us, now you people have started counting beggars," Vicky said in amazement.

"What can we do, Bade Mamu," Feroza pursed her lips. "For forty years our relations have been very, I mean, strained. So people on both sides have become unnecessarily sensitive about the smallest things."

"You say strained! For forty years they have been challenging each other's existence! Just sensitive? It's completely abnormal."

A few years after independence, Majaz had written:

There my sincerity is being doubted
Here suspicion about me is no less.

As if to sum up the matter, Rana Sahib quoted the closing couplet of the ghazal.

How difficult it is arranging this world
Not like arranging your curling hair.

Vicky looked at his watch."While it is still light, let us move towards a place where there are no relationships—only silence. Just a void."

Vicky Miyan was moving ahead on the highway into the gathering dusk in his red Maruti van.

"Mamu Miyan," Pinky said to Feroza, changing gears, "is now moving from Mysticism to Grace."

"How sweet," said Feroza, gathering up her hair which was flying in the wind.

"This place is very conducive to philosophy," Pinky said. "In

this wilderness these stupas are treasure-houses of silence. Here on this side, there is an ancient grave next to a stupa. The companions of Ghazi Miyan are buried here—this must have been a battle-ground."

"A stupa and a grave! This is indeed a strange place."

"What is their relationship to each other?" Safia spoke again in her scary tone. She sounds as if the bones of ancient monks were rattling in their burial caskets. My imagination has become unnecessarily active, Feroza shuddered.

"Whose relationship, Chhoti Khala?"

"Between silence and silence. What is the relationship between the stones? Coal turns into diamonds and peacocks dance in the forest."

"Tell her to start playing hockey," Parveen whispered to Zarina.

"Hain?"

"Or basketball."

"Or coal turns into diamonds," Safia kept mumbling.

"Hope none of the children have been left behind at the fair?" Zarina suddenly said, worried. "Where are Shelly, Amy, Dinky, Sally?"

"They are all safe, Ammi, they are following us," Pinky answered.

Parveen Sultan suddenly started crying. Poor thing, what a lonely life she has lived. Her husband deserted her and the unfortunate one had to bring up three children alone. She had to fill the gap left by an absent father. And I just quarrel with her all the time when I visit. But she is a spitfire, too.

She placed her hand affectionately on her older sister's hand. I wish Feroza was marrying into her family. Pinky is so besotted with her. He seems to have lost his spirit since he heard about that wretched Brian, otherwise he was such a charmer. But what can I do? The children of today are so headstrong.

Feroza screamed. "Arrey, arrey, look, Pinky! A gentleman is carrying fodder on an elephant. And he is sitting on it as calmly as if he was in a Concorde!"

"Did you see the crowds at the bus stand in the fair? They all

seemed so pleased, as if they were returning from Switzerland," Pinky answered.

At one spot there were lit-up shops by the road side. Saffron flags on their thatched roofs fluttered in the evening breeze.

"Pinky, what do these orange flags mean? Here, there is a symbolism behind everything."

"They belong to a right-wing political party. They must have had a rally in the city."

"Right-wing, left-wing. In your country the political situation is very—I mean complicated. Isn't it?

"Yes, that's true."

The three ladies had fallen fast asleep on the back seat.

"The governments of South Asia," Feroza said passionately, "agree on one thing."

"Shhh—speak softly. They are asleep in the back."

"They agree on one issue," Feroza whispered, "to let matters stay the way they are."

"Sitting under the tamarind you've learnt a lot in one afternoon."

Safia let out a snore.

"The poor things are tired. They've been roaming around with us for three days. They've really been good sports." Feroza sounded glum again. "Pinky, I want to come back here. I mean—that—to see places and things like this. The things Rana Sahib told us about—the Muharram mourning of the jogis and the nohas sung by the banjaras. *Cry Bano, your lord has been killed, your eldest born too killed in the forest.* And what they recite on the ninth day of Muharram, at two at night, standing in a circle."

"Oh ho, then you must get Brian to see the last African women of Lucknow lamenting, standing around in a circle."

What sort of behaviour is this? Taunting me about Brian for no rhyme or reason! Feroza frowned. "African women, here?"

"Yes, I know of two, Zamurrad and Almas. Probably still alive. In the old palaces there were many. Nani Amma, apart from observing Muharram in the Sunni way, would also go to some

special assemblies to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. Ammi and Chhoti Khala still go to those. I, too, would tag along. In those lanes, pairs of reciters of nohas following the tazias, and inside the threshold of the medieval houses, the African women! They would stand in a circle and majestically beat their chests gently with both hands as if they were hearing a primordial African beat. In their tuneful voices they would describe the misfortunes of the ladies at Karbala—the hai hai re hai, hai mother re—Bibi Zainab cries, my brother has been killed. Their cousins in the fields of the American south sang their negro spirituals in the same sad, profound way."

"Sorry, but there is too much wailing, all this hai hai."

"Haven't you just heard the joyous wah wahs of the groom-parties? Ferry, the problem is that in some universal cultures, traditions cannot be communicated. I'll try and explain. Nani had a friend, Rani Badshah Begum."

Feroza started laughing. Pinky looked at her, surprised.

"Is it true? Was that her name—Rani Badshah Begum?" Feroza asked.

"Yes, why? She used to live in Zartaj Manzil on Victoria Street. Why do you ask? And why are you laughing?" He fell silent.

"Your reaction is an example of this communication gap." Feroza continued to laugh hysterically. She repeated, "Rani Badshah Begum! Zartaj Manzil—Queen-Emperor Begum, living in the Golden Crown Palace. Some royalty complex! Okay, then?"

"Nannu would make me wear the ring that symbolised the vow she had made for my well-being, and take me there with her. As I was still seven or eight I could be present where the women were. On the ninth night of Muharram, the courtyard would be full of Hindu women who had also made vows. Exactly at ten o'clock all the women would go and sit behind curtains and even take the children with them. Some women clad in black, walking with great dignity, would sit in the centre of the courtyard and recite superb soz and salaams. This small group of women reciters in black, sitting on white sheets in the middle of the large, quiet imambara, was a strange and very moving sight. Lonely and disconnected

from the world, sitting in front of the standards and tazia which were reminders of grief and affliction. This sight would be totally beyond the understanding of, say, a Chinese person."

"Why Chinese, it is beyond my imagination, too," said Feroza.

"Upstairs, behind the curtains, with Ammi and Nannu, I would be hanging over the balcony. I didn't understand then why even children were hidden from these women who were reciting below—a famous courtesan of the city and her daughters who rented one of Rani Badshah Begum's houses and had been allowed to come into Zartaj Manzil on the night of the ninth to recite marsias. In 1959, I was sent to Naintial and then I, too, like the Chinese, failed to understand the inner meaning of Christmas."

"You mean the concept of 'One World' is meaningless unless a person is temperamentally a multilinguist."

"These Circles and Orders will go on or will suddenly end or disappear. You better not get involved with any of them. Keep your eyes focused on the future."

"That's right, I have my sights focused on the future. But I want to come back here—to places like this shrine. I want to see popular life and traditions. Not just here but back home in Sindh and Punjab, too.

"Then, as Manek Khala would say, you want to start with the roots of the grass-area studies."

"Then I might write something."

"Aren't you going to be writing on Poonam Dhillon?"

"Oh ho, please! Brian knows a publisher."

"Your book will be published and then?"

"Meaning?"

"It will be reviewed."

"Yes, I hope so."

"It will be discussed in gatherings of intellectuals. Then?"

"People will read it."

"And then what?"

"Oh ho Pinky, please!"

"Shhh! Speak softly! All right then, you have found the keys of

observation, deliberation and classification. But where is the perfect diviner who will lead you to the treasure?"

"Every diviner turns into an ogre—'*Move on, we still haven't reached our goal*'."

"It's amazing, Ferry. Vicky Miyan and his contemporaries were repeating this poem forty years ago and we are still repeating it. Moses had emerged from the desert in less than forty years."

The car Fali and Shehla were in overtook them and they waved. They were singing qawwalis.

"These people are so happy!"

"Say, mashallah."

"Mashallah."

"Aren't you happy?"

"What?"

"Happy?"

"Pinky, I may not come here for this fantasy wedding, but if Brian insists, I will have to."

"Don't, forget traveller, you have to come," he hummed the film song with forced hilarity.

Feroza wiped her wet eyes with her finger. "Or else we will have a simple wedding there even though the very idea of simplicity has vanished from our lifestyles. Pinky, have you seen our weddings? Just one pre-wedding ceremony is spread out over a week of dinners."

"The great results of cultural excess."

"Exhibitionism—it's unbelievable."

"Our nouveau riche Muslim brethren have begun imitating you. Exhibitionism and excess. But where was the simplicity in the carnival that you wanted, with elephants and bhands? The class that had weddings with those has disappeared, along with their horses and elephants. But I'm sure Dinky's wedding is going to be very grand. The Waderas still have their land as well as their power."

"So you've found out about that?"

"Just by chance. Last night after dinner Manek Khala, after she

bought a painting from Zafarul Islam, said that it was a wedding present for Dinky! He is a black horse—she meant a dark horse. He's found a jet-setting Wadera girl, she said."

"Oh ho...."

"Feroza, I'm upset because he kept this from me when we have been friends from childhood."

"Maybe because he felt you would be upset because of Salima."

"Was I upset with your news?"

After a few minutes of silence Feroza spoke. "Shall I confess something else? Thinking that you would feel bad about it I haven't told you that when Ammi starts telling her friends about Teen Katori, I feel irritated and tell her to drop it and not talk about her mint garden."

"What's a mint garden?" Pinky asked.

The three sisters woke up.

It was going almost four in the morning. Safia looked at the lit dial of the car and screamed, "Pinky, stop the car."

Her nephew panicked and applied the brakes. Safia opened the door and got out, and went and stood by the side of the road. She looked up and stared at the fading stars, then called out loudly, "There is a hindrance, it has to be postponed."

Inside the car, both her older sisters kept sitting, their heads bowed, sad and embarrassed.

*

In Jeet Van Vihar tall cranes had been set up. There were also arc lights and machinery for digging. At sunrise, a Japanese cameraman and Japanese and Indian archaeologists arrived. The excavations began.

"What are they digging for?" Vicky Miyan asked.

The Japanese mistook him for an expert from Heidelberg on ancient matters. People in his group were busy looking down into a newly-excavated dwelling.

"How did the students move around in such tiny cells?"

"In Taxila, too, the rooms are very small."

Vicky Miyan smiled. "Thank God, at least something turns out to be similar."

"In Taxila under a frieze, there is an inscription—'The Miracle of Saraswati'. What happened here?"

Mrs Dhondy went off to tie a thread to a branch of the majestic tree, the seed of which had been brought from Bodh Gaya and planted here. In Gaya, Mahatma Buddha had discovered god knows what under it. They all went towards it.

Some Thai women were tying strips of cloth to a low branch.

"The infidels too ask for boons like this!" Parveen expressed her surprise.

"Penny," Vicky Miyan admonished her. "Imagination is universal. By the way, non-Muslims are polytheists. Infidels are those who deny the existence of God. As for Jain and Buddhist viewpoints, I don't have the time to explain them to you right now. I am very busy." He went on ahead to examine some flowers.

Parveen Sultan smiled indulgently. Vicky Bhaiyya and his lectures! All his life he had advised people. The world didn't listen to him nor did he listen to the world.

Mehnaz, Amina and Feroza, all of similar ages, strolled off together. Amina's Marathi ayah, Radha Bai, put Amina's two children to sleep on a bench and sat with them. Rani Dulhan sat on another bench and began to doze.

Fali and Pinky were talking to the Japanese.

Parveen stood under the peepal tree. Zarina and Shehla walked up to her. "You are standing here all alone," her sister said.

"A penny for your thoughts," Shehla asked affectionately.

"It's nothing. Travel is now on my mind. This time next week, inshallah, we will be in Karachi. In fact, we will be asleep."

The dry leaves of the peepal made a loud crackling noise as Safia passed by, walking rapidly over them.

"Good grief! Where are you running off to?" Parveen called out.

"From silence to silence where darkness speaks to itself," she informed them, hesitatingly.

"Wait." Zarina called out to Amina's maid. "Radha Bai bring the flask of coffee."

"In silence are there only distances or is it pure proximity, dear heart?" Safia fired another question.

In the extensive gardens of the Vihar, she moved to where she saw complete quiet, where there was no one. "Chhoti Khala has begun wandering again," Shehla said sadly.

"She is the victim of the everyone's indifference!" Parveen was indignant.

"Penny," Zarina said angrily as she moved towards a bench.

"Yes, Bajiya."

"Come here, sit." She was quiet for some time then said, "Didn't you also have some responsibility towards your younger sister? What could I do all alone? Abba and Amma are both dead. The two brothers were constantly fighting legal cases against each other. I brought up three children by myself."

"I know that, Bajiya."

"Didn't their father have any responsibility? He divorced me but the children are his. You live in the same city as him. Couldn't you have talked that man into at least writing occasionally to his children?"

"Bajiya, his wife is very wicked."

"These children don't even know what it is like to have a father. Forget money, he didn't even write to them. Was it enough that they were being brought up by their rich grandparents? And even in their grandparents' home there is no extravagance any more. Vicky and Bobby have squandered whatever was left by fighting each other. For some time now Safia Begum has been the sole owner of a successful school but did it ever occur to her to spend even one naya paisa on her nephew or nieces? Tight-fist that she is."

"Arrey, Ammi, will you let these matters go," Shehla sounded vexed.

"Neither uncle nor aunt came forward to help. After the death of Amma and Miyan Abba I had to sell my land and jewellery to educate them, and here you are, Parveen Sultan, blaming me for

everything. You know that Safia herself is responsible for the state she is in. First she is greedy for money, and then she is so stingy. Clatters around in broken chappals like a crazy woman. Why didn't you try to get her married?"

"What could I have done. I've always lived away—across the seven seas."

"That's a good excuse."

"What can I do now?" Suddenly she began to cry helplessly.

Shehla put her hand on her shoulder. "Arrey, arrey. Penny Khala, don't cry so early in the morning, please. You are about to go home. You should leave happily."

A serious-faced Japanese passed by.

"What will these Japanese think? They are so brave. They don't cry even once in their lives. And what will these archaeologists think?"

"The world can go to hell! No one solves our current problems, instead they are busy digging up old graves," said Parveen between hiccups.

"Penny Khala, just feel the morning breeze. There is such spirituality in the atmosphere ."

"Stop prattling, Shehla. Go and look for Safia," Zarina ordered.

There was a squirrel sitting on its haunches at Parveen's feet, holding a raw mango in its tiny paws, as if making a peace offering to a foreign guest. *Om padme mane hum*, transform your impure body, speech and mind.

Zarina called out to her nephews, "Tony, Bunny, Jimmy!"

The three came running, cheerful young boys with faces in fresh bloom. Once, Vicky and Bobby had been like them, untroubled and fresh, leaping and bounding. Vicky had become old like this peepal tree. Bobby had turned into a prickly creeper.

"Yes, Phuphijaniya?"

"Go and find Chhoti Phuphu. We're ready to leave."

The three boys happily set out like boy scouts, looking for their aunt.

Parveen dried her eyes with the edge of her French chiffon dupatta.

"Marriage. Marriage is the only subject that the two of you ever discuss," Shehla pulled a face.

"She is dreaming of becoming a judge in the high court," her mother complained.

"Why not? There are many lady judges in Pakistani high courts."

"Just turn into an old pap like her Chhoti Khala."

"Ammi, she hasn't turned into an old pap. When you come next time, Penny Khala, you'll meet the Honourable Justice Mirza."

"Don't lose your head, Shelly Begum. Aye, Bajiya—Feroza used to prattle like this. When she told me about Brian, I thanked God. Bajiya, what else could I have done? I was helpless. Love for one's children makes one powerless. Maternal feelings incapacitate you, Bajiya. Do you think I like her marrying a Christian?" Parveen again began to weep piteously.

Manek Bai, having tied a thread and prayed to dear Buddha, returned. Vicky Miyan was standing under the Bodhi tree, smiling like a rabbit. A yellow rain seemed to be falling around him and a thick yellow carpet had rolled out around his feet. On the chabutra Thai women were sitting, perhaps thinking about their Thai dreams. Safia appeared with her nephews.

Vicky picked up a leaf and presented it to Manek Bai. "A present from a dervish. A fine painting can be done on this."

"I paint on georgette saris. I'll paint on this, too, Vicky Bhai."

"Paint *Om padme mane hum* on it. The diamond hidden in the heart of a lotus."

"Isn't that the great mantra of the Buddhists? But I don't know Pali. Will English do?"

"It will definitely do, Manek Bai."

"What a sweet thing Manek Khala is. I will miss all of you a lot," Feroza said to Amina.

The group moved towards the gate of Jeet Van Vihar.

*

Three days after they returned to Lucknow, Pinky went to the Indira Gandhi International Airport to see Parveen, Dinky and

Feroza off. All of them were very sad and they would continue to be gloomy for the next few days. Everything would remind them of those who had gone back to Pakistan. And then they would get busy in their own lives.

Mangoes, water-melons and jamuns were all over the city. The month of Asadh passed. A new swing was hung from a branch of the kadam tree. Bahar and Sona Kali expertly dyed muslin dupattas. Bahar Ara Begum crinkled the tie-and-dyed dupattas with the same expertise with which she crinkled kurta sleeves for Vicky Miyan and her sons, and then twisted them into intertwined loops. "We will send these for Parveen and Feroza with someone who is going to Pakistan," Zarina said.

"Ammi, why on earth are you sending these? Those people don't wear cotton. Feroza said wearing pure silk was like wearing wax-cloth," Shehla said, irritated.

"You be quiet. This exchange of presents will only last as long as we are alive. Your children will be total strangers to each other."

"Ammi, let me explain it to you like this," Pinky said. "Do you know the name of your great-great grandfather? No? Do you know who the descendants of his siblings are? No? Where are they? Not even that? Nor do you care! So what's so strange if our descendants don't know each other? Think about this and relax!"

*

The monsoon had begun when Shaikh Tahir Ali informed them that he was about to arrive from Calcutta.

Vicky had the file for the proposed Rose House brought out.

12
Alha Udal

A DUSKY, pleasant-faced lady in an elegant cotton Bengal sari with a broad border and green stripes stood on the veranda of the Carlton Hotel, looking intently at the mannequins of a nawab and begum, which some chikan trader had installed in a showcase as an advertisement. A coquettish cleaning woman in a paddy green skirt and red dupatta was swabbing the floor. Silver earrings hidden in her thick hair glimmered with the movement of her hand. Outside, hidden in the dark monsoon clouds, lightning flashed. The green of the hotel's tall trees merged with the emerald hues of Sikandar Bagh. The earthy scent and freshness of wet mud permeated the atmosphere. After the heat of Jeth and Asadh, it was the season of freshness and rain.

Waiters dressed in white moved around the veranda like shadows of the Raj—another colonial island like the Tollygunge Club. The lady in the Bengal sari had been brought up in the same British shadows among the upper classes of Calcutta and Darjeeling. She did not find this hotel very different. She looked at the plaster of paris nawab and begum again. The dummy of the nawab sahib, wearing a white angarkha and two-piece cap greeted people with an adab—his head inclined downwards, himself slightly bent with his right hand raised, he was frozen in courteous formality while the world passed him by. The artificial begum wore an embroidered gharara. Below them was the name of some firm.

Pinky's tall shadow had fallen on the wet, gleaming floor before he appeared.

Queen Sheeba and the floor, a surface of water. The lady looked at her wrist-watch casually and said, "Mr Mirza? Laila Sarosh."

Pinky automatically greeted her like the nawab in the showcase.

"Daddy has been waiting for you since nine as per our appointment."

"I'm sorry, there were a few trunk-calls that I had to attend to," Pinky laughed sheepishly.

A super-efficient, no-nonsense business woman. She had been her father's right-hand ever since she completed her MBA, but was so busy that she hadn't been able to come to Lucknow till now.

"These, too, the nawab and begum, have become symbols for tourism. Who is selling them?" the young lady asked as she kept up a fast pace with Pinky.

"Our Rastogis."

"Who are they?"

"They are like your Marwaris in Calcutta."

"I will study the north Indian chikan and brocade markets. Have you any idea about their export figures—and the sort of chunri that that woman was wearing?"

She was an amazing entrepreneur. He hesitated at a door.

"Not here, it is further ahead. How many furlongs is this veranda?"

"Our British rulers were the successors of Nawab Asafud Daulah. They left behind substantial buildings."

"Rose House better be significant, too. And finished on time."

There were countless women entrepreneurs in Bombay and Calcutta. But in this provincial city she would be a bit of a curiosity. Pinky was worried because he, in any case, was called Panky Pinky, the sort who reached office at ten. And what office, it was the card room of Shirin Castle. His relations with the people of this city were like those between members of a large joint family. His friends and acquaintances were the sons of his parents' friends and acquaintances—as if they were part of his inheritance. His servants, too, were born of their former servants. Forty years ago, the people of Punjab and Sindh had settled here as refugees, adopted the local colour of speech and manners, but they were nimble and alert; hence, they had come to dominate business. Even so, life was

comfortable. To the people of Lucknow, this Laila Sarosh would be like a lady with a whip.

The veranda continued like a flowing river. They ran into the same cleaning woman swabbing a corner. She wished Pinky with élan.

"The sweepress has cleaned just this much in all this while!"

"They are called Class Four employees."

"Slow motion, everything in slow motion."

However, on the third day, Pinky Miyan, who had reached Shirin Castle at nine, dialled his older sister with alacrity, "Appi, what was that couplet, 'If you do not mind, for the peace of my heart...'" He disconnected the phone immediately as if he was in a terrible hurry.

After a while, he rang his mother, Zarina Sultan. "Ammi, this Friday, inshallah, work will begin on Shaikh Sahib's land. Laila wants to organise a nativity function for the Prophet, for blessings. Can you organise it at our place?"

"Sure. But she still hasn't called on us."

"They've been very busy. They'll come tomorrow after their morning walk."

Laila made a note in her notebook—T.K.H. 7:30 a.m.

Carlton Hotel was situated halfway between T.K.H. and Shirin Castle. For years it had been the tradition that families from Teen Katori House and Shirin Castle would meet at the gate of Sikandar Bagh before sunrise, and then go for a walk inside the garden.

In the last fifteen years, Mr Tahir Ali, the elephant-trader, had often come to Lucknow in connection with the legal case over Red Rose. He had stayed at the Carlton so often that the room he occupied came to be known as the 'room of the Shaikh Sahib from Calcutta.' He rarely went for a walk in the Sikandar Bagh on these visits. After winning the case against the destitute mirasi, it was while walking in this garden that he had given Parvez and Farhad the contract for Rose House. On this visit, Vicky and Salima and Pinky and Shehla would take Shaikh Sahib and his daughter with them from the gate of the hotel to the gate of Sikandar Bagh, where

the Dhondy family would be waiting. Fali, Pinky and the Shaikh father and daughter would talk about the proposed building while they walked. Vicky would stop at various points to show his friends the flowers and trees, and walk around the lotus ponds. Wearing shalwar-qameez or jogging suits and canvas shoes, swarms of smart men and women passed each other on the fragrant pathways. Acquaintances wished each other with namaste, good morning or adabarz. As the sun rose, they got into the cars or scooters parked at the gate and disappeared. On Shah Najaf Road in front of the Shah Najaf Imambara which adjoined the garden, brown sahibs with their memsahibs and dogs would return to their old houses.

However, this peaceful ambience was also fast disappearing. On this once pleasant road, most of the bungalows had been demolished, and apartment blocks and offices had been constructed in their place. Often, after their morning walk, Manek Bai would take the visitors from Calcutta to her home to give them an English breakfast. One morning she said, "Look this side, Mr Tyre of the Elephants. Fali is bending down on all the old bungalows. But I have said, don't touch Shirin Castle. You do not understand its sentimental value."

"Oh wo, Mummy! How long are you going to keep living in this Ali Baba's cave? Dinky was shocked at seeing its condition but kept quiet out of politeness. Your room is like the labyrinth of the Bada Imambara. Just say yes, and then see how I put up a fantastic fifteen story Shirin Tower in place of this foreign beehive—all green and blue glass, mirrors and chandeliers. A lotus in front of every picture—Mummy, is this a house or an imambara? Which reminds me, Mehnaz, why don't you show Laila the city on Sunday? And Laila, you are such a workaholic despite being a jungle girl!"

"Daddy is about to go back, but I will stay on and speed up the work—people say there is going to be a lot of rain this monsoon."

"How can a girl like you stay alone at the hotel? Move in with us here."

"Don't put Laila in the upstairs bedroom in the Chateau

Margo," Fali addressed Laila in a conspiratorial tone. "Colonel Dubois used to stay there. He still walks around at midnight, along with Fifi. And she barks!"

"I'm used to English ghosts in Calcutta, don't you worry."

*

They all entered the labyrinth of the Asafi Imambara. Shehla and Mehnaz were walking ahead. Manek Bai, because of her weight, was left behind and Laila was walking with her. Manek Bai said, "Your Daddy has come so often to Lucknow, but this is your first time. Why so?"

"First, I was in America studying. Then I got involved with work, because none of my three younger brothers wants to do business. They are all involved in high technology so who was there to help Daddy except me? I have only one uncle, and he was in East Pakistan. He would trap elephants in Chatgaam and Sylhet. In 1971, his wife and children were killed and his daughters abducted. He managed to escape to Calcutta and Daddy got him involved in his business. But the trauma of losing his wife and children was so great that his heart gave way. Now he is always ill, and I work in his stead."

"Well done! But listen, slow down. Instead of trapping elephants, catch a boy now. Did you hear what I said?"

"What?"

"Our Pinky, do you hear me? Life is a dark tunnel. Your dear father's cousin ran into the wrong girl in this labyrinth of life. Look what happened to him. And Safia Sultan, she has deliberately lost herself in a maze. And then the Vicky affair—that Chandni Begum tragedy. May God forgive these people. I was so upset that I stopped meeting them for a long time. Man, intoxicated by wealth and position, forgets. See what happened to your uncle. When he was living comfortably with his family in Sylhet did he ever think that such a horrendous tragedy would befall him? You are riding a wave at the moment but put aside your pride for a bit. Run towards wherever you see the light in this tunnel. You are no longer a chick of a spring hen."

"....?"

Laila wasn't familiar with Manek Bai, or she would have understood that she meant spring chicken.

"Mummy is this city's leading matchmaker."

"Yes, Mehnaz."

"Pinky?"

"Yes, Mehnaz."

"What did you say?"

"Yes, Mehnaz."

"Exactly like Oscar Wilde! Well done! Come along."

*

The monsoon passed. The senior partner of Parvez and Farhad flew to Bengal along with the autumn winds. On a glittering night in Tollygunge Club, over a cup of tea, one yuppie told another yuppie about his Mysore project.

"That was far-sighted," the female entrepreneur smiled appreciatively. "Drinking tea improves the eyesight; you can see Dumraon from Mughal Sarai."

"I'm very concerned about Mamujan's eldest son, Tony. He has a poetic temperament, is more interested in flowers and birds. My middle-aunt along with her family were visiting, and we took them around. On one of the roads we saw a sandalwood tree, and suddenly I thought that the idea of sandalwood would appeal to Tony Miyan. I was looking for a partner from Karnataka. Anyway. A Bong timber expert seated on an elephant will do. As Fali says, Allah creates ways."

Laila was lost in thought.

A yellow autumn night. The wind passing through remote forests sounded like the melodious song of a Baul hermit. Outside the club, the tall trees, their trunks wearing a saffron garb of leaves, stood like members of the Warsi Sufi order.

The round, yellow-faced full moon of Kartik Purnima looking like a bald Lama, peeked in through the window.

"Oh wo, yeah—sure! Two-three years ago I met a very senior

Lama in the jungles," the zealous girl answered, used to the Bengali adda culture which included long sessions of banter, pleasurable arguments and debates, as she sat down comfortably on a window seat.

"He had come down from the mountains of Bhutan and was wandering around in my jungle. His feet were wounded from all the walking. I put him on an elephant and took him to Binnaguri. On the way he said...."

"If you mention Bhutan, I will bring up all species and kinds of Lamas who came down from the mountains of California to the banks of the Sheesha Pani."

"Just listen to me. The Lama said no thing or event is independent of the other. An individual has many relationships with the entire universe. No one is a stranger nor is anyone independent. Everything affects everything else. Arrey, wonder what the matter is. Why is Victoria Memorial barking?"

"It is said that the stone lions beside the Thames roar on rare occasions. So the Victoria Memorial has started barking!"

"Arrey, no! It's the dog of a very clever Englishman! Very sweet."

Why does every girl speak in the same way? Feroza used to say, look at that sweet donkey grazing there, how sweet that washerman is.

"Hello, what stupor have you disappeared into?"

"Aha, what a sweet Lama that was; and his philosophy, so cute. And original."

"Do shut up."

The two began discussing their scheme again.

"In the sandal industry, thirty per cent of capitalists and seventy per cent of traditional workers are Muslims who produce traditional and modern cosmetics. If we...."

Lady Ghosh, an old friend of Shaikh Sarosh, passed through the lounge on her way to the Bridge Room. She heard a bit of their business talk. In our time, she thought sadly, young fiancés would sit on this window seat and talk of moonlight and roses. The very idea of romance is dead.

Shaikh and Mirza arrived in Lucknow. Laila, as usual, stayed in Shirin Castle.

On a pleasant and bright morning, a demoiselle crane came and sat on the peepal tree in the courtyard of Red Rose, and called out in Al Hamdu's voice, ho, Munshiji, the kharincha has come down from the mountain, winter is here.

*

Bulldozers arrived to remove the inhabitants of 'Gulab Bari' from Mr Tahir Ali's estate. On one side there was a tent for policemen. A shamiana had been put up and a few chairs and tables were placed under it. Steam rose from the kettle on the stove. Parvez and Farhad's employees had distributed sweets to the labourers. Pinky, Fali and Laila sat around a table looking at papers.

Safia Sultan was busy having a part of the land on which she planned to build her kindergarten, measured.

"For the arcade of Rose House," Pinky said to Laila, "we are inundated with bookings. Listen to this," he took out a list. "First, there is the Pari Khana Beauty Parlour of Mr Mehboob Salmani. He has returned after being trained in hairdressing from London. He has styled Amitabh Bachchan's hair in Bombay, and he has a salon running in Hazratganj. He is the grandson of our barber. This is real democracy, Laila. There is now some hope for this capitalist society."

"Very true."

"The second is Fatafat Laundry which belongs to Manzur Ahmad, son of the late Natthu who worked here in Red Rose. Manzur Ahmad has come back after spending a long time in Jeddah. His Jhat Pat Laundry is already running in the city.

"The third is King Fu Chinese Restaurant, belonging to Ladle Mirza."

"From his name, he sounds like a prince," Fali commented.

"Yes, he lives in Agha Mir ki Deorhi. He will make his cook the manager. He still has to deposit the first instalment."

"Then there are a few Lalas with supermarkets, fast food shops and video game parlours."

"Video games! Please don't make this arcade into a Palika Bazaar. Chhoti Khala's school will be out there, right in front."

"Baazicha e atfal or Ghalib's Children's Playground," Vicky Miyan was heard before he appeared, a smile on his face. Pinky, Fali and Laila stood up. "Walekum asalam, Bade Mamu."

"Bajiya was sending lunch for you. I, too, came to join the children's party."

The three young people were happy to see him. Safia returned, and their faces fell.

"You are opening a children's playground here?" Vicky Miyan asked her.

"Qambar Miyan used to say that he wanted to start a children's school on his grounds. His soul will be happy," Safia answered.

"The late Qambar Ali wanted to provide free education to poor children. Your school is going to be very expensive. How much do you plan to charge? Five hundred rupees a month for every child? This area is now mostly inhabited by very wealthy Punjabi and Sindhi businessmen."

Safia frowned and moved away.

"What's your aunt's problem?" Laila asked Pinky softly.

"It's complicated. Let's look at the plans for your penthouse."

*

Those were the days of spring, those were the days
This was the place and here was that abode
Oh keeper of the garden
How many remembered things shall I recount?

Karanje, the bhand arrived with his group, singing. He greeted all those present.

"Arrey, don't sing such a sad song on this occasion," Pinky said.

"Forgive us our error, Sir. Your watchmen wouldn't let us in. Batasha came to call us. We came to find out when the foreign groom's party was going to arrive. We went to the house and were told you were here."

The foreign groom's party! Pinky's face paled. Laila was

surprised at this sudden change in him. In grief, Vicky took a puff from his pipe.

Children and their emotional problems.

He got up and walked towards the bird-bath. Bitto Chachi's gleaming, well-appointed bathrooms had disappeared. The clouds continued to provide water for the arrangements she had made for the birds who continued to bathe and preen themselves.

A small bird with a long beak and long legs came and sat on the rim of the bath.

"Hello," Vicky said, and then looked at Laila. "Feroza has flown away." He addressed the bird in all earnestness. "Laila is a female yuppie, and she won't fly away. But will you counsel her too, please?"

Suddenly, an unconnected thought occurred to him. He called out to the young people. "Tell me, when did the Emperor go for his toilet?

Pinky and Fali started laughing. Good old Vicky Mamu!

"I looked all over Fatehpur Sikri—where was Emperor Akbar's lavatory?"

"Sir, nature must have made some arrangements," Karanje Bhand suggested with folded hands. And having caught the Raja Sahib's attention, he began a conversation with him.

"What do you say, Sahib, shall I buy Sikri back from the pigeons?"

"They'll return."

"This bramble garden, what does it cost?

"One bottle of earth-perfume."

"What will you grow here?"

"A hundred flowers."

"Why not a thousand?"

"I'll have to pay a tax."

"And?"

"A bottle gourd. As big as this bulldozer."

"That big! How will you ever cook it?"

"In the river Gomti. The groom's party is coming from abroad. Lord knows how many people there will be."

"Will fishes be fried in the ocean for the groom's party that will travel from here to Calcutta?"

Embarrassed, Laila started to look at the files.

"Will she bring it on a camel?" The dialogue continued.

"On a howdah!"

"Mahodeh Sir, what are the main benefits of this dowry for us?"

Pinky burst out laughing. "Why don't you guys appear on Doordarshan."

"Will we get a darshini hundi—a draft cheque. Sir, may your fortune (Iqbal) be high, and beneficence (Faiz) continue. We live in hope (Firaq) that a nourisher of talent like you gets enthused (Josh)," Karanje said punning on the nom de plumes of famous poets.

"So, Moth, when will the she-camel arrive?"

"Not a she-camel, you idiot, a castle-howdah."

"These people have found out your name, your father's business, etc. Because you are called Laila, they hint at your bringing a large dower. They brought in the castle-howdah in relation to the elephants," Pinky whispered to Laila.

Vicky Miyan signalled his personal attendant with his eyebrow. He took the bhand to one side and gave them some money. They showered Vicky Miyan with traditional blessings.

A group of villagers looked in. Karanje said, "Thakur Mahabir Prasad Singh, as per your wish, asked for some bhaats, too. The last bhaat of Teen Katori died long ago."

Loud slogans of "Har, Har Mahadev!" were being raised outside the courtyard followed by a buzz among the crowd. Pinky asked his clerk, "What is the matter?"

"Perhaps a fair is being held."

"But people are coming into the compound. Wait, I'll go and see."

At the eastern end of the grounds a crowd had collected under the peepal tree.

"What is the matter?"

"Sir, a fair is being held at Mahadev Garhi."

"Mahadev Garhi? Where is that?"

"Here, right where you are standing."

"But this land belongs to Shaikh Sahib."

"But the choudharyji has told us this is Mahadev Garhi, and today is the auspicious inauguration of its fair."

"Who is this choudharyji?"

"The leader of our block."

Pinky looked around. On three sides of the peepal, a wall had been erected with white-washed bricks. He asked a cowherd. "When was this temple built?"

"In ancient times, Sir."

He looked towards the other side. On the west, a similar wall had been built around the mosque.

Pinky summoned an overseer. "Mathur Sahib, both these people have illegally occupied about five hundred square yards of land. Didn't you notice these white bricks earlier?"

"Sir, I've been busy on the northern side since the morning. I didn't come this way."

Fali came across. The three went towards the mosque. A young cleric was sitting on the wall looking at what the Hindus were up to.

"Asalamalekum, Maulvi Sahib."

"Walekum asalam."

"What is this boundary wall all about?"

"Only Allah knows."

"Since when have you been here?"

"My late father used to lead the prayers in this mosque. The cowherds appointed him. Since then it has been considered the land of the Mosque of the Brambles, also known as the mosque of Gulab Bari."

"Where is that?"

"Right where you are standing."

"Arrey, mullahji, what are you talking about? This is a part of Shaikh Tahir Ali's private property."

"It is owned by Allah. I was born here in Gulab Bari."

"But Gulab Bari is in Faizabad."

"This settlement of the poor and meek, right here, also has the same perfumed name."

Both the architects came back to the awning. Exhausted, Pinky sat down on a chair and said to the bhaat, "All right then, recite your Alha—"

The chief bhaat, Baqridi, was the true son of Hanif Khan who, thirty years ago, had gone to Raghubir Prasad Singh's garden-house in Chinhat. At that time, including the young Baqridi, there were six of them. Today it was a huge group, along with children, as if there had been an expansion of penury and the vote bank.

Baqridi Khan made a request, "My patrons, please employ my sons to carry the bricks. Because of your blessings and Allah's grace, there are seven of mine as well as those of my uncle and brothers. They all work as labourers. People now want to see television, not hear Alha."

They all stood there, scared. Four of them came to the front. Like Kabuki actors and according to the old tradition, they prostrated themselves in front of the Raja Sahib of Teen Katori. What have the Japanese samurai and the India warriors left behind?

Millionaire actors. And starving bhaats.

Baqridi Khan sat on his haunches and began his fluent rendition.

They entered the fort of Bahraich
To the Deccan went Shah Madar
They went east to Ayodhya
The city of Lord Ram's avatar.

Politicians have made Ayodhya a frightening problem while these innocent ones display the marvels of their recitation.

This old Alha saga is not meant for these times.

Vicky Miyan, a finger at his temple and head bent, kept sitting and listening to them.

They entered the fort of Bahraich,
To the Deccan went Shah Madar

"First the listener and reciter disappear, then the artistry of the artist. When the artist does not get feedback, he starts dealing in dregs and presenting rubbish. There is a lot still left in Baqridi's art.

But if you do not invite him to your children's weddings, you will soon find him drawing water or cutting wood." He sounded like an ancient Hebrew prophet announcing destruction. His white beard shivered in the breeze.

Pinky laughed. "Mamu Miyan, don't turn into such a prophet of doom. You have become very gloomy. Look, I'll try and have Baqridi Khan sent for the next Festival of India in Washington."

Indifferent to his career and his future, Baqridi remained immersed in his inherited art and recited tirelessly.

Devi Lalita went west
Har Har flows mother Gomti
Across the Jamuna Alha sits
Listen, brother, to my words
Ali, Ali the Sayyid calls
As he runs in Ali's name
Sayyid ordered Alha
Listen, brother, to my words.

*

The next morning Pinky was at home, having breakfast, when Khush Qadam Bua brought out the telephone and placed it on the table. A bewildered Mathur Sahib was calling from the office. "Sir, the people have raised a two foot high wall around the temple and the mosque, overnight."

"Have those walls bulldozed immediately, before you even get the slum vacated. Do it now," Pinky ordered.

*

"Hello? Yes, this is Salima. Greetings."

"Listen, Sally Bitiya, where is Pinky? I have called Shehla, and called Safia. Neither of them will tell me."

"Bhaiyya has gone with Laila Baji to the airport. Listen, let me finish, Manek Khala. Laila Baji came here from your place this morning and just then there was a call from Calcutta to say that her

uncle was critically ill. Bhaiyya has put her on the first flight out. She was weeping a lot, so Miyan Abba, Ammi and Phuphijaniya have all gone to see her off. No, she hasn't been able to take her stuff because she didn't have time. After all, she has only gone home. I tried calling you many times but your phone was always busy, and there was very little time left for the flight to leave. Chhoti Phupu is busy upstairs in her school so she might not have known. Manek Khala, is everything all right?"

"Things are not good. Pinky ordered the walls to be bulldozed and the cowherds and milkmen brought their cows and put them in front of the bulldozers. Do you understand? Fali has summoned the police. As soon as Pinky returns, tell him."

In panic, Manek Bai put down the phone and went to her prayer-room. Repeating the Zoroastrian prayer, 'In the name of Yazdah, the benevolent and the benefactor,' she sat down with a thump on the floor. In front of her, on a long shelf, were pictures of the Prophet Zoroaster, Jesus Christ, Mahatma Buddha, many Hindu goddesses and gods and Sai Baba of Shirdi. Around her, on the walls, were photographs of the Holy Ka'ba and Hindu pilgrimage sites. Like many Parsis, she was a particular devotee of the Khwaja of Ajmer. She closed her eyes, pressed her hands together and pleaded, "Khwaja Sahib, let there be peace for the boys—let Fali and Pinky be safe."

*

Pinky sat under the awning, busy talking to a police officer and lawyer. Two constables had already been posted in front of the temple and the mosque. Inside the boundary, cows were chewing cud. Around the small temple and mosque saffron flags and green flags with the crescent moon, fluttered. 'Save Mahadev Garhi' and 'Save the Bramble Mosque' were pasted on the gate and similar posters were stuck on the walls of the old city.

A little while later the police officer got into his jeep and left. The lawyer, who was barrister Shehla's junior, left for the high court.

A stooped, ageing stranger in a loose suit, cut in the American style, entered the shamiana. "Asalamalekum, Pinky Miyan—remember me?"

"Walekum asalam." Pinky took a good look at him. Regretfully, shook his head.

"Meraj Ahmad! Does it ring a bell? You were very young when I used to come with the late Qambar to meet Vicky Miyan."

"Yes, yes, I remember now. It's great to see you. Please sit down. But what a strange coincidence! During the Red Rose case, Badshah Jani looked for you all over to be a witness. Now that Master Mogra has lost his case, you turn up. Where have you been?"

Strange coincidence? Meraj Ahmad was surprised. He remembered that at this spot where the red awning now stood, two or three days after the fire he had sat around the still-warm ashes and told his colleagues—We hear the fire was an accident. These accidents are very strange. The world was created accidentally, life appeared accidentally, and one day it will end accidentally.

"Where were you all this time?" Parvez Mirza's query brought him back from the mound of ashes.

"California."

"But you were a well-known left-wing journalist. How did you get a visa?"

"You can consider that an accident, too. And California is a liberal state. That fire left me so traumatised that I could no longer stay here so I moved with my wife and children. I spent some time in England and from there went to America. I did various jobs. My sons, after completing their education, established themselves in their businesses. Pinky Miyan, I now have all that the world has to offer, but how could I find Hata Sitara Begum there? Therefore, I came back."

A 'politicised' cow belonging to the cowherds entered the awning and calmly started grazing. A scarf of green paper flags with the crescent and star on them was draped around its neck. Another cow belonging to the milkmen wearing a garland of marigold and with a mark on its forehead, also entered the awning.

Pinky laughed. "Take a look. The protestors have sent their ambassadors to you. Perhaps they have found out that you are an American journalist."

"Me being considered an American journalist! God help me."

All the narratives have turned into fables.
Ahmad Hussain Khan, times have changed.

He heaved a deep sigh.

Pinky poured some tea for him.

"When I left, it was the tail-end of spring. The red roses had begun to bloom. Now that I am back, I see marigolds all around. And tall date trees."

"You are right. The dates are purely Saudi. And the melons from the banks of the Gomti have acquired an Irani tinge. Other roses have been grafted on to your precious rose plants."

"Pinky Miyan, asses have eaten up the rose garden we planted."

"Your generation didn't fertilise it properly, otherwise, forty years later, this population of eighty or ninety crores wouldn't have sunk into confusion."

"Pinky Miyan, this can of worms hasn't been created only by our shortcomings. Ever since I returned home, I have been studying this current situation of yours. The cowherds and milkmen have started propaganda against Shaikh Tahir Hussain," Meraj Ahmad said, using a term from Aligarh University student politics. "But Pinky Miyan, you too were quick to call in the bulldozers."

"Sir, those are larger political problems facing the country. This is an ordinary local matter of encroachments on private property. It will settle down."

"No, leaders make mountain out of molehills. There is the problem of Ram Janmabhoomi and Babri Masjid...."

"Oh no—not that again. Meraj Sahib, I'm tired of listening...."

"Pinky Miyan, this too is a matter of places of worship—the easiest way to illegally occupy land—a small temple or the name of some holy man written on a small platform and a flag with the crescent and star, as if it were the shrine of a saint. Right-wing parties

are now involved in this. As of now, they are both on the same side but the matter can take a communal turn at any moment."

"Meraj Sahib, you forget, this is Lucknow. Here, despite the communal turn, there will be no Hindu-Muslim riots. There have been none until now. These people enjoy collective celebrations—who wins in a kite match or whose bird wins in a quail fight. You might remember, though I was very young in 1961, when there was a huge flood, marooned people were sending out messages through kites!

"A few days ago I passed by here. It was a moonlit night. A lot of the milkmen were sitting on the parapet singing a birha—'I don't care, Bibi Fatima take us across—Haider Shah look after us—O Prophet.' Meraj Sahib, seeing their innocent faith, I was very moved. When their dwellings are pulled down, they will all be homeless."

"Aren't these people who have set up this illegal settlement not the real owners of the land? Perhaps it was from their ancestors that Qambar Miyan's father had grabbed the land. He was about to return it...."

Pinky lit a cigarette. "Meraj Sahib, this area used to be the property of the refractory Banka Shaikhs of Lucknow. They were called bankas because they were good swordsmen, right? Burhanul Mulk took the land from them through an order of the Mughal emperor. And who did the Mughals win their kingdom from? From the Lodis. And they had taken it from the Sharqis, and Sir, before them, there were the Tughlaqs, Khlijis, etc, etc. and before them, Prithvi Raj was fighting Alha and Udal, and all the Rajputs were engaged in constant warfare and land-grabbing. They drove out the weakened Guptas who themselves had done the same to the Mauryas and before them...."

Meraj Ahmad raised his hands, as if in surrender. "Listen to me. I'm a part of that group of people called the intelligentsia in India—committed to principles and intellectual integrity. We write letters of protest to newspapers and present papers at seminars. But in actuality, we are an integral part of the system. The cogs of this system."

"Because I have studied at Sherwood and Columbia I never plunged into leftist politics nor did I join the right-wing, but kept splashing in the middle. Currently, we are called yuppies though we can't compete with the puppies."

"Miyan, who are these puppies?"

"Punjabi upwardly progressive professionals. You have returned home after a quarter of a century. The scene here has changed completely. When Red Rose caught fire there was no political mafia nor was there urban terrorism. If the fire were to happen today, the rumour would spread that Qambar Ali discovered some sensational political secrets of international importance which he published in his three magazines. The magazines had been printed and were about to reach the newsstands. Therefore, his opponents, in the dead of night, through a burqa-wearing agent, planted a time bomb in Red Rose. This mysterious, veiled lady was seen with Qambar Miyan on the bridge over the river at a quarter to six in the evening. Moreover, since you, Meraj Ahmad, the chief reporter had unearthed those secrets, you had to leave the county immediately."

"There was talk of sabotage even then, but the unanimous decision was that the fire was an accident because Qambar Ali had no enemies whatsoever. In fact, he was such a benign person that he used to get battered by his wife. Anyway, who was that burqa-covered lady? Was anything discovered about her later?"

"She was Chandni Baji. Why do you want to hear her sad story? Even at the time when the newspapers talked of 'a lady guest' my family kept unnecessarily silent. When I returned from school, I heard that Chandni Baji had left and that Qambar Ali had brought her here."

"Here, to this wilderness," Meraj Ahmad said with a start. Concerned, Pinky looked at him. "I'm sorry, Pinky Miyan, I just got disoriented."

"Meraj Sahib, Bade Mamu says that Qambar Miyan was a true idealist. Following his ideals, he spent all his wealth on elections and his magazines, yet he hadn't given up. You don't see people like

him anymore. One day, Vicky Mamu was telling us that high walls have been erected all over the world. Some crazy Gogs and Magogs keep scratching at these walls, but the walls are only getting higher.

"Vicky Mamu himself is one of these crazies. Qambar Ali, too, was one of them. My poor Mamu stayed confined in his ivory tower, at least Qambar tried to do something while he was still young. I wish he had endowed this land for public use in his lifetime, but he did not have the time.

"It is the irony of history that the poor are being dispossessed of his land by a capitalist to build an apartment block. Forty flats, costing ten lakhs each. And each one of them has already been booked."

"Is that so!" Meraj Sahib was shocked again. "Where have people suddenly got all this money from?" He fell silent.

"I was saying that if the tragic accident of the fire happened now, a horrible scenario about its origins would have been created. But that was the era of Nehru. Conditions were peaceful. There weren't that many communal riots either."

"Yes, what was that about? Sorry, I am a bit disoriented."

Pinky offered him a cigarette which he refused.

"Meraj Sahib, is your health okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, thank God. I went over to your place last night. I sat for a long time with Vicky Miyan in the baradari. He has always been a progressive man. But your younger uncle spread the rumour that the abolition of princely states caused him to lose his mind. The new lack of scruple disturbed him greatly. Yesterday he was saying that no one was ready to walk on the path of reconciliation anymore. Now there is only one inevitable direction left for us, and that is towards the Aish Bagh graveyard."

"Meraj Sahib, why do our elders think so negatively? Why this constant talk of the graveyards at Hata Sitara Begum, Aish Bagh, the garden of Maulvi Anwar?"

"What else am I supposed to do? What great things have I done with my life? I called the West names but chose to settle there. And I set up my sons in America!"

Mathur Sahib appeared with a lawyer.

"This land business has become a complete nuisance. This must be why Baba Neem Chameli has stopped living on land and has been sitting on the branch of a banyan tree for fifty years."

"The yogi from Balaganj? Is he still alive?"

"Yes. Mrs Dhondy regularly has an audience with him. Once she dragged me along with her. He said to me, son, read the Surah Muzammil. I was amazed. How did he know so much about the Quran?"

"I have heard that he cures terminal illnesses with a pinch of ash."

Pinky looked at Mehraj Ahmad in surprise.

Shirin Castle—Breakfast Room

"Look this side, Fali, Mr Tyre Bhai Elephant Man is such a big businessman, a jungle elephant. Yes, his stomach is never full. He now wants Elephant and Castle, too."

"Waah, waah, Mummy! There is nothing to match your wit and humour."

"What's so great about winning over a poor harmonium-master? If he had taken on someone who is his equal, it would have been something."

"Mummy, no one lets go of property that he has inherited. Listen, why don't you do something. Dil Bahar Bua served Granny so willingly and has spent her life serving us. In return,why don't you gift her the servant quarter she has been living in for—how many years has it been, Mehnaz?—yes, forty-five years. Her grandchildren will bless you."

"If your Granny had said this, it would have been fine."

"Who knows, she might have included that in her will but you removed that page!"

"Tauba, tauba, God forbid, Fali boy. You say that about the daughter of a Dastur? And listen, if I feel like it, I might leave her the servant quarter. When you build Shirin Tower and decorate it with a motif of Fifi, the poodle, it will be known as the dog hotel, French

style, five stars. I'll look down from the sky and be very pleased. I will still be on the way to Chinvat Bridge when the bulldozers arrive. But promise me that you will not eject Bua's family."

"Arrey, Mummy, I was only joking."

"You joke with me, Framoze Dhondy?'

The Baradari in Teen Katori House

"Laila, you spent a long time in Calcutta. Anyway, what could you have done by returning any earlier? These people have got stay orders from the court. Our construction work has stopped. Once the Shia-Sunni riots were over, many leaders were sitting idle. Now they have got down to work again. Mahadev Garhi, has become another issue. Every day there are new posters and press releases. They plan to obtain this entire land from the court and build a Brij Dham cow shelter and Vedic centre on it. One day some white devotees were seen distributing their pamphlets. The proposal to build an international Arabic school in the compound of the mosque has also been announced. The Sunni and Shia supporters of Iran and Iraq have been holding separate meetings on the land. It is claimed that this place has been a Devasthan for millions of years."

"A million years ago there was an ocean here," said Laila.

"But that round stone that was taken out of the river, when was it placed in the roots of the peepal tree? On the other hand, leaders belonging to the mosque faction are saying that the great-grandfather of Shaikhs Azhar and Tahir Ali had acquired the land by force. The entire area had been endowed by the ruler of that time for the upkeep of the mosque. There also used to be a rest house for travellers here."

"Then why don't they get those papers from the Sunni Waqf Board? Daddy was telling me that it was a tradition among the wealthy that they would build a mosque on the grounds before their houses were built."

"But which ancestor of yours had this mosque and well built? Now Appi will fight this case. The temple-mosque committee has collected funds and appointed a well-known lawyer."

"Can't the symbol of Shiva be carbon dated?"

"A stone taken out of the depths of a river will relate to geological time. The entire Hindu mythology is based on geological time. The mosque is built of thin-lakhauri bricks. It was built in the eighteenth century evidently, probably before 1737 in the time of the Shaikhs. Your ancestors were most probably related to the Shaikhs of Lucknow."

"Is that so? Daddy was telling me that his ancestors settled in the village of Kursi after the destruction of Machchi Bhavan. Pinky, I came here to construct a building, not to dig the graves of history. Daddy is already very upset because of the death of my uncle, now this sudden trouble."

"Don't worry. I've asked Vicky Mamu to research the times of the Shaikhs. I'm sure he will find something."

Both of them looked up. The lights of the library were on.

"And Laila, don't tell anyone that you are actually from Kursi. That village is known for its fools. Land of the idiots."

"Daddy said that all the family papers were in the custody of Azhar Ali Chacha and were burnt. He only had the genealogical tree which he presented to the court against Ustad Mogra to prove his claim to the inheritance. Nowhere in that did it say which ancestor of ours built the mosque."

"How is your daddy's health?"

"Not good. He keeps crying, thinking of my uncle and his troubles. His heart is very weak. They tied my uncle to a pillar and shot his wife and sons in front of him, and took away both his young daughters, Farida and Farhana. There is still no news of them. My uncle died because of this trauma. He lived with this agony for a full fifteen years. At night, while asleep, he would call out to Farida and Farhana. He used to say that just as each grain of food is supposed to have the name of its consumer inscribed on it, similarly, each bullet has the name of the person it was meant to kill engraved on it.

Screaming birds were approaching the trees.

"Vicky Mamu says like humans, the birds must have had their prophets too."

"They don't need prophets," Laila replied, rubbing her eyes. "I've spent a lot of time in the jungle."

"When I met you for the first time at the Carlton I thought you were a hard-hearted woman. Remember, after seeing our monsoon chunris, you had said that you would get our tie-and-dye experts, Khush Qadam Bua and Sona Kali, to dye them and you would export them. Chatapati quilts and ghararas, as well as Hyderabadi, Rampuri and Bhopali pyjamas. There was going to be a Laila Boutique in Bombay, London, Toronto..."

"Laila Boutique can go to hell! Pinky, don't mock me."

Safia Sultan emerged from the house and strolled up to the baradari. Laila got up immediately and went in to wash her face.

"She's a tough lady, why is she sulking now? She wasn't ready to reduce the price of the land for my kindergarten by one naya paisa. Has she suffered a loss in her business?"

"Chhoti Khala, the loss of her uncle is still fresh. They haven't held the fortieth day rites yet, and she had to come here because of this new trouble."

"Yes, it's been a huge loss. The two brothers must have been smuggling elephants. What does Manek Bai call him, Mr Tyre Bhai? And he looks like a Dunlop tyre. His brother's death must have punctured him. Smuggled elephants and hashish across the Nepal border—it must have been a huge loss for her. Why else does she mourn her uncle so much? When Bobby dies, will Vicky's children mourn him like this?"

"Chhoti Khala, please. You are suspicious of the entire world."

Safia stood up immediately "This is why I never join all of you. As for the rest, that land is cursed, forget about it. Fifteen days before you began work on it, the voice had told me repeatedly—*he forbids it.* That is what has happened. Such a huge problem arose. Things went topsy-turvy."

She went down into the garden. Pinky lit a cigarette.

Laila returned.

Pinky was amazed at how much this half-Bengali girl reminded him of Feroza, despite the difference in their upbringing and

background! Both were rebellious and opinionated. Both were modern eastern women. How much did class and their western education have to do with their self-confidence?

Safia was walking along the garden path. The end of her sari rose in the wind. Immediately she pulled it around her and moved rapidly ahead.

"Arrey!" Laila exclaimed.

"Never let on. She is very sensitive about it."

"Maybe I understand her now."

"Her disability is not her problem."

"Then?"

"Little Sir Echo?"

"Who is that?"

"Little Sir Echo, a resident of Red Rose. He is non-existent, the absent one who exists in the imaginary world of ideas."

"Pinky, you too have become mad. I'm telling you that I will have to reconsider my decision about you."

"Arrey, please don't. Don't do that."

"Can't any of you talk straight instead of in riddles? Why should I become part of an abnormal family?" She became tearful again.

"Come on, Laila!"

"She has never spoken to me properly. The other day I was telling Shehla Appi that your aunt has such a large ego that she doesn't bother to speak to people. Perhaps she heard me, because she has become even more distant since then. What harm have I done to her?"

"Laila, please."

"Tell me what the matter with her is. Maybe I can do something for her. You know that I also work with tribals in the jungle and because of my business dealings I have learnt to deal with all sorts of people," she sniffed into a delicate handkerchief. "At Stanford...."

Pinky smiled.

"Don't laugh."

"Okay. First tell me, do you know anything about being betrothed at birth? Does it happen in Bengal?"

"I don't know."

"Qambar Miyan's grandmother put a gold coin on a shard....'

"Another riddle?"

"No, it means to be engaged at birth. The begums in purdah had few amusements other than custom and ritual. Qambar Miyan's mother and my great-grandmother were busy with rituals all their lives. They have both passed away. Safia Khala was thirteen when she was stricken with polio. She began considering herself a tragic heroine because people stopped talking about her engagement.

"My mother's parents continued to believe that Barrister and Begum Ali would keep their word despite her disability, and they might have done so. But around the time of Bobby Mamu's first wedding, our manager Kali Charan met Munshi Bhawani Shankar and asked him about it indirectly. Munshiji's response was unclear—that Bhaiyya wasn't agreeing, that he was refusing the match. Lala came and told my grandmother that.

"Safia Khala heard that Qambar was refusing to marry her. Because I am a cripple, she exclaimed, and locked herself up in her room and cried for days. Ever since then she's been indifferent to everybody. The family felt very guilty towards her. To save them further embarrassment she busied herself in studies, night and day. Got one degree after another, MAs, PhD, what have you.

"This was the pattern with many families in small towns. Young children of landowners were either married or engaged at an early age. They would grow up, go to universities, become socialists, run away from the conservative atmosphere of their homes."

"Yes, I have heard that this happened a lot in Bengal, too."

"These people would then go in for non-conformist weddings or spend their lives as romantic revolutionaries.

"Qambar Miyan's family, I mean your family, wasn't old-fashioned. His parents were in touch with the new professional classes. Both his mother and father were liberal-minded people, they couldn't have forced their son into a marriage. They were also aware that great injustice had been done to poor Safia Sultan for which his paternal grandmother and my maternal grandmother

were responsible. The poor things! And Qambar Miyan, after his parents' deaths, out of sheer compassion, tied himself to a mirasi's daughter. From what I have heard, what was worse, as far as Safia Khala is concerned, Qambar Miyan always spoke sarcastically about his image of her as a useless, ill-tempered rich heiress when, in fact, poor Chhoti Khala, despite her handicap, became a sort of career woman. She typed her PhD dissertation with one hand. She runs a school independently and efficiently."

"I will have to change my opinion about her."

"One should change one's views after being acquainted with the facts. But we don't do this because we don't want to accept the embarrassment of our views having been proved wrong."

"You are right, young Guruji."

"Bade Mamu tried very hard to console and befriend her. But she had already broken her contact with people, till suddenly, one day, Little Sir Echo appeared."

"Some Englishman?"

Again, so much like Feroza! Despite all her wisdom, this sudden naivety.

"Come on, Pinky, tell me, why have you become quiet? It must have been some stout cricketer of the M.C.C. who toured India. Look how accurately I have guessed, despite being from Kursi!!"

"When my Parveen Khala was studying at Isabella Thoburn College, there was a famous American cinema star Judy Garland."

"Yes, I know."

"One of her songs became very famous:

Little Sir Echo, how do you do! Hello! Hello!
Little Sir Echo, Come dance with me, Hello, Hello!!"

"All right, Ohho, I see."

"Sir Echo spoke for the first time after Qambar Miyan's sensational wedding, but Khala mentioned this to no one. He was back with a bang after the fire at Red Rose. One day when I got up in the morning, there was total silence. I discovered that for the past few days Chhoti Khala had been making very dire predictions and

they were coming true. The night before, she had announced that by the following afternoon, a corpse would leave the house. That evening Nuran Bua's poor mother died. After this everyone was tip-toeing around, extremely scared of Safia Khala.

"Batashan Bua said it was an evil spirit and a cunning exorcist should be called, but Ammi told her off. During this time Parveen Khala arrived for four days. She had come from Cairo and was on her way to Tokyo. It was then that she named Safia Khala's mysterious voice Little Sir Echo which was not only appropriate, it was also correct.

"Vicky Mamu, as was his wont, explained it philosophically. He said that all of us, people of the east, are caught in the web of Sir Little Echo."

"Didn't Mrs Dhondy have an opinion?"

"Those days she was extremely upset with us and wasn't meeting us because of the Chandni Begum tragedy.

"The neurologist said that because of extreme trauma the nerves that were directly responsible for her hearing had been affected and whenever there was extra pressure on these nerves, Safia began to hear what she was imagining.

"One of Nana Miyan's employees, Durga Prasad, tried to explain it via Jain philosophy. Whatever anyone thinks about Bitiya's mind is true, he philosophised.

"Afraid that the medicines might have the opposite effect, Safia refused to take what the doctor prescribed. I'm already a cripple, she said, do you want me to become deaf, too? She had lost her trust in people. Then she turned into a miser. Kali Charan and Nani Amma somehow managed to get an exorcist necromancer. The problem was how to get Safia Khala to see him. It was Batashan Bua who finally told Safia Khala, who shouted at her and sent her away. The old gentleman then sat in an empty room in the servants' quarter. I too went to see what was going on. He had burnt some incense and was rocking and muttering some mumbo jumbo ending in 'Dam, dam Shah Madar'. I thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle, came back and went around the house shouting: 'What have you done,

you who I had sent, Shah Madar will drive you away!' Ammi was passing by in the corridor, she caught hold of me and gave me a tight slap. I was extremely naughty as a child.

"Little Sir Echo has been silent for a long time, but he can appear suddenly. I can tell by the look of dread on Khala's face that she is hearing the voice again. But she carries on quietly with whatever she is doing."

"How dreadful! But the question is, why was she so obsessed with Qambar Chacha? Engagements do break after all."

"The romance of a childhood engagement. The old maids who worked here talk of the long line of servants who came singing and carrying trays of toys, sweets, clothes, presents from Qambar Miyan's house on festive occasions. The same pattern of gift-giving was followed between this house and theirs. As Safia grew up, naturally Qambar Miyan turned into the beloved who lived across the river.

"She had grown up reading English romantic novels and watching romantic films. You and I are products of the new cynicism, romance disappeared from our lives long ago."

"That romance was life-threatening in any case."

"Arrey, I've heard that while Parveen Khala was in college, she would call her friends and here, in this baradari, they would celebrate Dilip Kumar's birthday."

"Is that so?" Laila let out a guffaw.

"That generation was very innocent. I remember Qambar Miyan a little. Skinny and shy he used to stammer, but I've heard he had the air of an intellectual revolutionary and was very popular with the girls.

"Apart from this, I think a feeling of guilt regarding Chandni Begum also plagued Khala. If she had behaved better towards her, perhaps Chandni Begum would not have gone to Red Rose in despair that night...."

"Doesn't the rest of your family feel guilty?"

"No one I think, except Vicky Mamu. There is total silence about that in our home. For months after the incident Vicky Mamu was absolutely quiet, so my grandmother arranged his marriage to

Atu Sahib's granddaughter. He accepted her decision like a mechanical doll.

"It wasn't as if Nani, Ammi, Parveen Khala and the other women were deliberately cruel or unfeeling. They were just insensitive, indifferent and too involved in themselves. Otherwise how come it never occurred to this class, for centuries, that they had no right to live in luxury on the backs of the labour of hungry, naked peasants? And my Nana Miyan had no idea what was going on inside the house, nor did he care. The same thing happened to Maggie Mumani."

"Pinky?" Laila asked after some hesitation. "How come the voice Safia Khala hears is prophetic? My Ammi would surely think it is a jinn or something."

The sun was setting. Mist floating over the river was moving towards the garden.

"Don't be silly. Vicky Miyan talks of when he once requested Munshi Pandit Durga Prasad to draw up Chandni Begum's horoscope. Panditji looked at her forehead for a moment, then shelved the matter. Did he, by just looking at her face, know that she would die soon? Nonsense. A few years ago Chhoti Khala went to Bombay. There, at a dinner, she met Harindranath Chattopadhyay. At that point of time Mana had taken over Harindrada. Mana was some child whose personality Harindrada would assume; he would speak in the voice of a child and behave like one. He is an experienced, veteran actor. Perhaps he has an alternate personality. Unfortunately, of all the dinners, Khala ended up at this one and came back convinced that she too was possessed by an alternate personality. But in that case, she should have been speaking in the voice of the other personality, she should have behaved differently, like one possessed by jinns or other spirits. Then she decided that she had the soul of someone else. People tried hard to explain to her that if that was so, why wasn't it speaking to her in Japanese or Tamil? Why did it speak the same way she did? Why don't you ask it if the fire at Red Rose was arson or an accident? And if it was an accident, how did it happen? What was the cause? The voice

always remained silent as far as these questions were concerned because Safia Khala herself does not know the answers. In fact, no one knows."

The mist started swirling around the baradari.

"Fali once said to her that the voice is clearly not that of Colonel Dubois or you would have learnt French by now. She had a good laugh at that. She laughs about once or twice a year. Luckily, she didn't get into the business of ghosts and evil spirits."

Laila kept the discussion going on the matter of hearing voices.

"Listen, Tom Sahib used to say that there are five brains inside the human skull but one usually uses only one of them."

"Yaar, just one human brain has created enough trouble, and you talk of five of them!"

"And Tom Sahib said that humans have a fourth dimension, too. This is related to man like the sea is related to the shore. The tides of this dimension come and go. These tides have both the past and present within them, and it depends which of them is sometimes intuited by man. This fourth dimension is the entire time-body of a man's life."

Pinky's ears pricked up. "I'm sure it is but let's forget it. And which wise man is this Tom Sahib?"

"Famous artist, soon to become a famous philosopher. And as it happens, he too came down from the Californian mountains."

Without a doubt, the art of conversation is a special cottage industry of the Urdu speakers of Uttar Pradesh. But Bengalis are no less adept at giving speeches. I should challenge her firmly right now, or after our marriage, she will be speaking and I, listening. No, this can't be allowed.

He cleared his throat and challenged her. "Listen, Laila. We can't come to a definite conclusion right now. The matter is still in the labyrinth of evolution."Aha—well done Mr Lover, you've left her speechless.

Labyrinth!! Riding the underground train of imagination which for a moment halted at the Asafi Imambara, and then moved on towards the sad, deserted, spine-chilling southern fort of the Deccani

Sultans and its dark winding tunnels, with the calls of the fast-moving, torch-bearing travellers calling out to the echo, echo, Little Sir Echo. How do you do? Hello, hello, Little Sir Echo, come dance with me, Hello. Hello...

Deeply moved, he dried the edge of his eye with the tip of his little finger. Poor dear Safia Khala.

Suddenly there was bright light outside the dark tunnel. On the green water of the Daulatabad Fort moat, green moss, the original water-plants, remains of the origins of life, and rising from it ruined ancient stairs.

Sitting under the cool shadow of the trees, curio-sellers selling coins to rich white tourists—from thick misshapen old royal seals with distorted Arabic and Persian inscriptions to elegant round coins of the East India Company with their English lettering, coins from the kingdoms of Faith to those of the Age of Darwin. Coins like those found by ploughmen in the soils of the fields as I have heard Jumma, the washerman, used to find when he ploughed the fields of Red Rose. His train of those thoughts went off on a tangent before returning to track.

"Right, Pinky. Perhaps you are right."

Mirza Sahib grinned. Convinced her, haven't I. Well done, Mr. Romeo. He put on his all-knowing look and cleared his throat again. "Look here, Laila Begum," he lit another cigarette, "these voices are echoes of the blind-well of Khala's psyche which she sometimes hears. Like the roar of the ocean in a seashell."

"A blind-well!"

"The first man did not even know how to speak. Supposing our evolution reaches a stage when others can hear our deepest thoughts, when our ideas can be seen as if on a cinema screen."

"There are millions of years still left for that next stage of evolution! And yes, Pinky, I had the blind-well at Red Rose filled with soil as soon as I arrived. Bhang had begun to grow there, and I had that dug up and thrown away. I have heard that hippies used to collect there."

Pinky called out to Safia, "Chhoti Khala, it's getting cold, come

in!" Then he turned to Laila, "The fact of the matter is that whenever she is disturbed or worried, for whatever reason, her repressed fears emerge as words because of the abnormality in her ears. The last few days she's been very excited about building her kindergarten on your land, but her lurking fears emerged—he is telling me not to, he is telling me not to, she said. Now she is linking these words to the problems with the temple and mosque. She was just saying that the land is cursed."

"Pinky, this superstition has taken hold of me, too," Laila said softly. "Perhaps Daddy has deprived those poor mirasis of their rights. The legal battle reduced those poor people to penury. And now we are about to uproot this slum."

Pinky drew deeply on his cigarette.

"Laila, this is not superstition. It's the voice of your conscience. Are you ready to listen to what your conscience is saying? Are you ready to build cheap housing instead of Rose House for these slum-dwellers?"

They saw Safia coming their way.

"As far as Khala's superstitions are concerned, if she could get...."

She fell silent because Safia was now close to the pond.

"What?" Laila asked softly.

"One Chhote Khalu."

Safia's hearing was very sharp. She scolded him sharply. "Stop talking rubbish," as she went towards the house.

"She should travel for relaxation."

"She is a miser and is also afraid of flying. She hasn't gone out of the country except for one trip to Karachi."

Khush Qadam Bua appeared wrapped in a warm shawl. "Bhaiyya, shall I have the dinner laid?"

"Yes, Bua, what have you had cooked?"

"Especially for Laila Bitiya, three kinds of fish, fried, in a curry and kabab."

A torch beam sparkled in the mist, and there were sounds of footsteps on the gravel.

"Aha, Meraj Sahib!" Pinky rose from his chair, "Adab."

"May you live long," Meraj Sahib entered with a muffler wrapped around his head. "It's already begun getting cold."

"It's December, Meraj Sahib!"

Laila greeted him.

"This is Miss Sarosh, she came from Bengal yesterday."

"May you live long—in my time there used to be an innocent poet called Salaam Machlishahri, deriving his name from the city of fish."

"The same one about whom Majaz has said he is the atom bomb of poets. That bomb fell on Hiroshima; he falls on all and sundry."

Meraj Ahmad laughed out loud. "How did you remember that?"

"As a child, I used to go to literary gatherings with Vicky Mamu."

"'She came from Bengal yesterday', was the opening line of one of his poems. Bibi, I heard about the death of your uncle. Sad, there was only one impact of the bombing of Hiroshima. It is over. The fallouts of our national sorrows are countless and who knows how long they will continue."

"It's a fortunate coincidence that you have returned from America. You can bear witness that the temple under the peepal tree was a part of the courtyard of Red Rose," Pinky said to Meraj Sahib. Turning to Khush Qadam Bua he said, "Arrey, Bua,—is that all! There should have been at least seven kinds of fish dishes."

"Yes, that's right. Munshi Bhawani Shankar Sokhta had built a platform around the little idol kept in the roots of the tree. He used to sit on it to worship and meditate. I saw him doing that for years," Meraj said.

"In the time of him who resides in paradise now, seven kinds of fish were cooked at each meal," Khush Qadam Bua commented.

"Who is he talking about?" Laila asked in a whisper.

"Nana Miyan, a well-known gourmet of his time. Yes, Meraj Sahib. Will you provide that evidence?"

"Given the current mood, will they accept my statement? Pinky Miyan, today, after ages, the sleeping reporter in me has awakened.

Early this morning, I went to the site and was dumbstruck with what I saw. It is an ordinary matter, but very prescient. We had formed a political party called the Red Rose Party. Qambar Miyan fought the election as a representative of this party. Our symbol was a sickle with a hammer, and a rose. I had the mould made. Two signboards in brass with this symbol were kept in the veranda. It was also printed on the first page of all three magazines. Today at the site I learnt that years later, Jumma the washerman, while ploughing the land unearthed these two signboards. He cleaned them and placed them against the mosque wall. In one of them the people of the mandir have scraped off the hammer and rose and engraved a trident within the sickle. On the other side, the mosque committee has erased the hammer and rose and made the sickle look like a crescent and placed an eight-pointed star within it. Both signboards are now fixed opposite each other. I still say that because of the trident and the crescent this matter can become a volcano."

Khush Qadam Bua returned.

Laila had become thoughtful regarding the question of testimony. Who knows how painfully the three had died. Spontaneously she uttered Qambar, Bela, Chandni.

"There is no witness...."

"The mosque, too, was private property."

"Testimony...!" Wearing a woollen dressing gown and a cap covering his ears, Vicky Miyan was standing in front of them. "I have come to give my testimony regarding the Shaikhs."

Simultaneously, the sound of the evening bugle call was heard from the police lines across the river. He turned on his heels and listened attentively to the extremely soft sound.

"Listen carefully—la, la, la, la, la, la, la di, dah, knowledgeable Britishers have excavated old Roman notations and their instruments and composed tunes with them. I heard it, and for a few seconds I recognised the tune—and a note—and thought it must have been played on the bugle in the cantonments of the Roman Empire and Roman Britain...."

In the soundscape of the evening the four of them, quiet and alone, continued looking at the mist which was moving towards them, in silent harmony.

Then Vicky Miyan said, "How did this begin, and why? If only man had..."

"In the past ten thousand years...." Meraj Ahmad said, "things have changed."

"But if we search, reliable witnesses can be found," Pinky said.

Vicky gave a start. "Roman trumpets and pan pipes and harps and Viking flutes made of the bones of ducks and sheep."

"Flutes made of bones? They have been playing since man was born," Meraj Ahmad said. They all fell silent again.

Someone closed the window of the library from inside.

"Mamu Miyan, did you find out anything?" Pinky asked softly.

"Yes, but not completely. Lord knows what trouble they were in when they were turned out of Machchi Bhawan."

"What were my aunt's and cousin's last thoughts when they were killed?" Laila asked.

"But, Bibi," Meraj Ahmad said, "we are happy that your hammer and sickle government has put an end to one kind of violence."

"But now the ethnic G.L.F in Darjeeling...."

"Forgive me. I have returned after a long time."

"Gorkha Liberation Front."

"And what do you think of those from Naxalbari?"

"Our business is in Naxalbari itself. And the workers in the Dooars are part of CITU."

"And Bibi, what is this CITU?"

The four of them left the summer house still talking, and walked towards the house.

"Inshallah, I am going to Mysore and Darjeeling. What can I send you from Calcutta?" Laila politely asked Safia at the dining table.

"Nothing, thank you."

"Arrey, Chhoti Khala, not even a Bengali sari? Send me one if you find someone coming this way," Shehla said.

"What about a Dhakai?" Laila asked again.

"I don't wear such flimsy saris. Thank you."

Zarina Sultan asked Pinky in a low voice. "Why does Meraj Sahib constantly mention a Hata Sitara Begum?"

"Ammi, the doctors in America have diagnosed cancer. Instead of getting himself treated he returned home. He was just telling me that his son is coming here to take him back."

At the end of the long dining table, Vicky Miyan was talking to Meraj Ahmad. "Brother, I have even had my headstone inscribed. 'This has happened, now what?'"

13
Tipu Sultan Bar

In looks and body language, the British secretary of the Tollygunge Club looked completely pucca. He stood on the back veranda watching the arrangements for New Year's Eve. He was a remnant of the Raj, and his presence was a pleasant, tragic and romantic reminder of an era which flashed before one's eyes, like scenes from a British film. More than an individual, he was a feeling. Because of his unique British sense of humour, he had named his beloved dog, Victoria Memorial, and his bearer, Bandooq, who now stood behind him like the rock of Gibraltar.

The club's Far Pavillion was glittering.

Come fleetily, come fleetily my hookabadar,
For the sound of the tom-tom is heard from afar.
"Banoolah! Banoolah!" The Brahmins are nigh,
And the depths of the jungle re-echo their cry.
Pestonjee Bomanjee!
Smite the guitar,
Join the chorus, my hookabadar.

The Secretary Sahib stood on the veranda, as some surviving Roman might have stood, leaning against the pillar of a building in the new messianic Britain, contemplating the sunset. Or as some Umayyad Moor might have watched the waning crescent through an arch of the newly Catholic Grenada. Who knows?

In Independent India there are a handful of original Englishmen who, every year on Christmas, remind themselves of the 'Bada Dins' they celebrated in their parents' large homes in distant districts, when crates arrived from Hall and Anderson, Calcutta; Murray Company; and Army and Navy Stores were unloaded and placed

on verandas, when they climbed into tom-tom carriages to go to church and when their good-natured grandmothers served wine they had made from a secret family recipe.

These are hard times for survivors used to an Imperial way of life.

Western filmmakers sought out these old ladies and gentlemen and hired them as consultants for their films on the Raj. Well-known Indian stars proudly played the roles of cooks, bearers, ayahs, clerks and comic 'native' characters in them.

In the same way as the novels of Agatha Christie were still bound in red leather in the Bengal Club, the colonial atmosphere survived in the Tollygunge Club.

*

It is said that Britain trembled only when faced by two opponents. In Europe, it was the Fatherland Germany, and here it was Haider Ali and Tipu. They were not only terrified of this father and son, but also impressed by their statesmanship and courage. Tipu wasn't one of their 'rebels'. Instead, he was a brilliant, strong, valiant and equal opponent. Therefore, the Wellesley Commission treated the Mysore princes with great, paternal kindness.

Fifty-eight years later their attitude towards ficticious fake rulers who became the hereditary pensioners of Delhi and Lucknow, changed. Mughal princes were executed for 'rebelling', and those who survived were humiliated and disgraced. This is the fate of the incompetent.

O huqqa bearers, sing in chorus:

Heed not the blast of the deadly monsoon
Nor the blue Brahmaputra that gleams in the moon
Stick to the music and Oh, let the sound
Be heard with distinction a mile or two around.
Jamsetjee, Jeejeebhoy!
Sweep the guitar,
Join in the chorus, my hookabadar.

Art thou a Buddhist, or dost thou indeed

Put faith in the mighty Mohmannedan creed?
Art thou a Ghebir—a kindly Parsee?
Not that it matters an atom to me.
Cursetjee Bomanjee!
Twang the guitar,
Join the chorus, my hookabadar.

Despite the tumult and uprooting that took place in Bengal twice after Independence, the voices that Henry Leigh had heard rising from the dense jungles in the last century, continue to be heard even today.

*

Driving past the magnificent, well-lit Tipu Sultan mosque, Abdul Majid, the chauffeur of Tahir Ali, the elephant-trader, brought the car to a halt outside the Club and Shaikh Sahib emerged from it. The fringe of white hair around his bald head fluttered in a gust of wind and made him look like a fictional character or a frightful vision from Mars. Anger and concern caused the telegram in his fingers to tremble. He turned towards the Tipu Sultan Bar and met Sattar, the waiter, on the way.

"The moment Arshad arrives, send him here," he told him. He walked to the bar and sat down on a stool. Victoria Memorial also walked into the bar and after strolling around, walked out.

A few minutes later, another gentleman entered the bar and wished him, "Adabarz, Bhaijan."

Shaikh Sahib handed the telegram to him. "The godowns and bungalows of Nikhil Rai, Subroto Chakravarti, Tarun Ghosh and of mine have been set on fire. There are morchas in the jungles."

"Bhaijan, why did you have to expand your business in that area?"

"Is there any place in the world that is safe? In any case, Laila, in partnership with her fiancée, is starting a project in Mysore—'Khatoon Yuppie'"

"Aha, sandalwood jungles! It seems like a fairy-tale business."

Shaikh Sahib frowned. After a spell of silence, he said, "Listen,

Arshad Miyan," and a small tear fell from the elephant's eye. "My younger brother, Mazhar Ali, after he was destroyed, wandered all over. Three nations were formed—one old, and two new. Yet people are not at peace. There is no stability, nor respite, we are being knocked around and getting killed. The earth seems to move—Mazhar Ali bought land in Sylhet, and that slipped right from under his feet. Yesterday I lost mine in the Dooars. And there is trouble in the property I inherited in Lucknow."

Victoria Memorial walked into the bar again.

"Only Victoria Memorial has some stability in his life. Hello, Vic...."

The dog wagged his tail in acknowledgement.

"I have come to the conclusion that we should never have left our ancestral village."

"Bhaijan, when is Laila expected?"

"Any time now. She has gone to New Market. Listen, Arshad Miyan. Our ancestors were Shaikhzadas, but no one knows about them because they were defeated. The rulers of Awadh were celebrated because they were the victors. Were the Shaikhs not valiant bankas? Did they not have a sword hanging at the Akbari Gate in Lucknow so that no one riding an elephant could pass by without acknowledging them? Were they idiots? Aji Sahib, the madrasa Firangi Mahal was established during their time. It was they who had the Machchi Bhawan and Panj Mahal built. And who knows what else. But history is written by the victors."

"Yes, Bhaijan."

"Arshad Hussain, do you know what the real value of land is?"

"The price is going up so rapidly—people now talk in crores."

"No, not at all. Laila has just found out from the bhands of Lucknow that land is just worth a bottle of rose itr. Subhan Allah, praise be to God."

"Bhaijan, I have heard that the Marwaris are trying to dispossess the Bengalis of their tea estates."

"Well, capitalists do it to other capitalists, politicians to politicians, and kings have been dispossessing other kings all

through history. Arshad Miyan, when Burhan ul-Mulk attacked the Machchi Bhawan, the Shaikhzadas stood before him with folded hands asking to be given a few days' time to evacuate the fort as the son of one of them was down with smallpox. Of course, that didn't happen, the Machchi Bhawan was attacked, and the Mughal forces looted and killed. A full hundred and fifty years later the foreigners drove Wajid Ali Shah out of Lucknow in a similar manner.

"I told Laila, Mazhar Ali is now dead. It was not in his stars to see Farida and Farhana as brides." Tears began to flow rapidly. "I too might depart at any time. I told her to stop mourning her uncle and start preparing her trousseau so that I could see her married while I am alive. Therefore, the day before yesterday, she went to see tailors at Matia Burj. In the royal Imambara, she witnessed a very moving sight. In front of the emperor's cenotaph there was a tray with coins in it, and a poor, burqa-clad woman was seeking a boon. Lo and behold, the Jaan e Alam has turned into a saint!"

"Bhaijan, people say that Wajid Ali Shah never once missed his early morning prayer, that the English have very unfairly defamed him. You just said that history was written by the victors. Who knows, the late emperor might have been a saintly person. These are spiritual matters after all."

"Absolutely! You are right. Your divorced wife Romila, too, said that you couldn't see her artistic soul, and you believe that she never understood the spirit of your leather business. All these are spiritual matters. All right then, Laila was saying that you want to settle down again. Hello … hello!"

Another gentleman came and sat down on a stool.

"Chakravarti, this is my wife's cousin, Mr Arshad Hussain, the leather king of Kanpur."

"Arrey no, Bhaijan, how can I ever be compared to the Shamsi community."

"Oh ho, hello! This is your wife's brother," Chakravarti grinned. Begum Tahir was from Jalpaiguri and presuming Tahir Hussain to be a fellow Bengali, Chakravarti greeted him warmly and began to speak to him in Bengali.

"He is only half-Bengali," Tahir Ali explained. "He doesn't speak Bengali. His fatherland is the province of Bihar."

"Sahib," Sattar, the bearer, appeared and addressed Chakravarti. "Lady Ghosh has arrived and sends you her salaams."

"Go, Chakravarti, go and play bridge with Lady Ghosh and distract yourself," Tahir Ali said. Chakravarti asked Arshad Hussain to excuse him and stood up. Tahir Ali continued to speak. "Lady Ghosh is one of the surviving virtues of the Raj. She must be over eighty but comes to the club regularly to play cards. And the earth under Chakravarti's feet has shifted for the second time. His parents came here from Dhaka in 1947, and he re-established his business in the Dooars. All that has been destroyed in the last couple of days. This Tollygunge Club that you are now sitting in is located in the four-and-a-half square miles of land that Wellesley gave Tipu's sons."

"They had taken such a vast kingdom from their father; this is the least they could do for the orphans."

"Miyan, the other day I was in a rickshaw and discovered that the puller was one of the descendants of the Tiger of Mysore. Couldn't he have been a jet pilot instead? What does all this mean?"

"Poverty."

"Poverty because of their extravagance. Do the children of the poor not get a good education? Look at the Hindus. Listen Arshad Hussain, Raja Rammohun Roy and Tipu Sultan were contemporaries, and both were prophets of the new India. There has been a metro station built in Tollygunge and the admirers of Rammohun Roy set a train on fire below the soil of Calcutta. The sons of Tipu are pulling rickshaws on the same soil, even after having lived for two hundred years in Calcutta, a world-renowned centre of learning." Tahir Ali drew out a handkerchief and dried his tears.

Arshad Ali looked at his watch. "All right, Bhaijan, I will...."

"Oh no, where are you off to, Shah Sahib?"

"Bhaijan, I've been in Calcutta for four days and have looked at ten newspapers, and there are only two stories in all of them. The

Gorkha agitation, and the participation of Dilawar and Anwar in it. The ever-suffering city of Calcutta...."

"The first story is destructive and the second is exemplary," Shaikh shook his head.

"I have heard it said that the moving story of the starving family members pulling rickshaws is pure invention in order to rally public opinion against the rival group, since the altered conditions of the Prince Ghulam Muhammad Trust have brought it to public attention once more. According to the wealthier branch of Tipu's descendants, this poorer group, because of its irregular and unauthenticated marriage ties, is not entitled to be considered legal heirs."

The tuskless bull elephant flapped its ears and brushed off three lame ants from its trunk.

Three destitute individuals left the high court in Lucknow, dejected.

The long-faced horse rider shook his silvery mane and lifted his drink.

"Miyan Sahibzade, you are looking very leathery today."

"The winds are very strong. And this jacket has been made in my factory!"

The elephant owner had drunk enough red wine. He returned to the shore and grumbled. "When the cubs of the tiger made this snake-nest of Englishmen into their lair..."

"I...?" A young Marwari asked.

"In other words, the sons of Tipu bought this house from a white Indigo planter..."

"Had they brought a lot of wealth with them from Vellore?"

"No, only God-given enterprise because of which Prince Ghulam Muhammad, Tipu's son, earned a lot of money through trade. Hun was the coinage of Vijayanagar which was melted into Victorian currency." The plantation owner was splashing around in the pool of eloquence, knowledge and rhetoric.

"The hun—hoon, hoon!" The modern Marwari was intoxicated, listening to matters regarding finance. The golden universe was just

one large cash ledger wrapped in red cloth. A pothi. The rest were endless scrolls that stupid people wrote in different languages. The only script was the Mori in which the bahi were written. Even the Red government hadn't been able to do away with these red ledgers.

"The ownership of the Prince Ghulam Muhammad Trust...."

"Yes, sir, speak of half of Calcutta," the Marwari interrupted him.

"Inside the city, outside it—the golf course, the race course, this club, that club, such valued real-estate in the centre—how many thousands of millions? How many?" After a dramatic pause, the elephantine Shaikh provided the listeners with an answer. "But because of differences and bad blood between the family and the administrators of the Trust, the Princes of Mysore...."

Successful people often need silent audiences. It was probably for this reason that his three sons had broken their bonds and fled. At home now was his poor sister, Apa Jan, a wax Madonna. And his daughter, Laila, who was of the generation that called a spade a spade. Spoilt, and her father's beloved, she would listen to his confused conversation and argue with him. After which she would say, "Rashshu Mamu, Daddy often makes a lot of sense."

Since Mr Hussain had started providing horses, saddlery and riders to film companies from Bombay and Madras, he constantly heard prominent business people talking endlessly and so was used to it. But right now he was restless and looked at his watch impatiently.

His brother-in-law raised his eyebrows and looked at him questioningly. "My dear, what is the hurry?"

"Bhaijan, *Begum ke Heere.*"

"...?"

"A crow has flown away with Queen Dil Afroz's priceless necklace."

"What rubbish are you talking, Rashshu Miyan? Are you drunk?

"I haven't been able to find a falcon because the Arab Sheikh's have flown away with most of Rajasthan's falcons."

"Shah Arshad Hussain, have you begun smoking something?"

"Followed by General Jahan Zeb's spectacular swordsmanship and the mischief of her maid, Phuljhari, Dil Afroz, Queen of Bahiristan's loyal friend, Phool Sungh Suraiyya Banu, riding a magnificent steed, will be lowered into the middle of the battlefield by a helicopter. The stupider they are, the happier I am because they need more horses. As well as a trained crow."

Shaikh Sahib sighed deeply and said, "You are right, Shah Sahib. If the stupidity of others benefits us, let them stay stupid."

"The filmmaker has reached Delhi. Just as I was leaving for the Club, I received a telegram from him summoning me immediately. Now should I send him a telegram asking him to have his head examined? Don't make *Begum ke Heere* but read Franz Kafka, which my wife Romila Bose used to read."

Victoria Memorial barked at the door.

"He is smart and well-mannered."

"He is an Englishman's dog, after all."

"They are dying of admiration for Englishmen. Churchill said there will come a day when these fools will miss us and weep."

Grandly, Victoria Memorial came in and sat at his feet.

"Only these dog-loving white gentlemen know their value and appreciate these dumb creatures. Smart doggy!" he said emotionally and bent down to stroke its silken head. "But both he and his master are aware that for a long time now a new currency has been in circulation in the market."

"Two sharp hints at one go!" his brother-in-law smiled.

From the far pavilion came an announcement: "Dinshaw Bharucha—guitarist."

Bomanji Pestonji, smite the guitar.

"Zubin Mehta is coming to Calcutta," someone said.

"Zubin Mehta...?" An awe-inspired silence followed.

Zubin Mehta, "Hussain the Master", Ravi Shankar.

What happens at the summit of fame?

Man turns into a smiling advertisement for toothpaste.

Shaikh kept his eyes on his drink.

"What should I say about what I am reminded of....

Gentlemen?" He spoke again. "I used to be called the elephant boy, and I would come here sometimes with Arzoo Lakhnavi. Here to Tollygunge, New Theatres. That is when Kanan Devi sang, 'I'll opt for the kamandal and leave this region.' Now where shall we go after leaving this region? There are morchas in Mayurganj. Did you know that before humans, jinns ruled the world, and before them, horses?"

"Sorry for interrupting you," Arshad said with equal seriousness. "What does that small plaque over the door say?"

"Tipu Sultan Bar! Since the time of the jinns. And yes, for those empire builders, owners of the world, emperors who had been given a taste of godliness,they often named their greyhounds Tipu Sultan, too." Another tear fell.

"All right, respected Bhaijan," Arshad Hussain got off his stool. "I have to...."

*

Dear Pinky. I came back from Mysore day before yesterday. Ammi and Daddy went with me. Daddy approves of your project. You should make a visit, too. Come, so that the sandal business can continue. Or send Tony first. I am scribbling this from a shop in New Market. While buying saris, I was struck by a brainwave. Chhote Khalu! Do you remember what you said that day in the baradari? One of Ammi's aunts was married in Patna and has a son, Arshad Hussain. He lives mostly in Kanpur or Frankfurt, and he is here these days. He is very suitable for Safia Khala. Divorced from his first wife, Romila Bose. No kids.

He has been rootless for quite some time now and wants to settle down. I believe that if we make some effort, he will agree. He intends to establish an educational institution in Kanpur. Safia Khala will be the perfect partner for him.

Tomorrow morning Daddy is sending Arshad Mamu to Lucknow regarding the Mandir-Masjid matter. I will send the saris with him. Make sure he meets Khala. All of you will have to be very diplomatic with her. Also be reassuring and considerate, which you never are. I am also sending a new sandal calendar—a new perfumed calendar

for the new year, for Safia Khala, on behalf of Arshad Mamu—a good omen!

Now I am going to take the metro and go to the Club. Mamu is staying somewhere very far, and if I miss him, it will be hard to catch him.

Wishing you all the best for the New Year.

Khuda Hafiz.

She had taken the sheet of paper from the shopkeeper, but he did not have a plain envelope. Well, she would get one at the Club. She counted the saris once more for they were meant for her future in-laws. Pinky's mother (dictator), Shehla (all right), Rani Dulhan and Salima (no problem), Safia Khala (a major problem), Amina (who is in Bombay, no idea about her)—this one for Mehnaz, and this one for her mother.

She paid the bill and a lad from the shop picked up her bag. They rushed to the Esplanade metro station.

An impatient wait for the train. She looked at the frescoes on the wall depicting colonial Calcutta.

In hindsight, every event and sight, turns into a story. The sahibs riding a buggy. The native agents of the Company. The sahib and the native ayah. The Edwardian memsahib listening to a gramophone with a horn. Anand Math. The partition of Bengal and the accompanying violence. In the long non-violent struggle these were unpalatable images, but had now become a captivating narrative, and displaying these images is evidence of the intellectual maturity of us Bengalis. Instead of erasing memories of colonialism we have converted them into art. Laila smiled proudly.

These scenes tell a story which looks as if it appeared and disappeared at great speed, the way the train comes rumbling in and rumbles out. Stations come and go in a flash. Park Street, sporting scenes bedecking Maidan, Rabindra Sadan decorated with blow-ups of Tagore's paintings and poems, Bhawani Pur, Jatin Das Park, Kali Ghat station with paintings in the Kali Ghat style, Rabindra Sarovar, Tollygunge.

She got off on the platform and quickly came up to street level, worried that Arshad Mamu might have left. She prayed that he hadn't. Reached the Tollygunge Club and sent the boy from the shop back. Daddy must be in the bar, so she went and sat in the adjoining lounge.

Sattar peeped in and greeted her. Went into the bar and said, "Bibi is here."

Tahir Ali emerged with the telegram in his hand. "What is the matter? Have you been running?"

"Full gallop, from Chowringee! I have to give this parcel to Arshad Mamu."

"Oh ho! He has just left."

"Arrey, but he was supposed to be leaving tomorrow morning!"

"Some important work came up. He has gone straight to Dum Dum from here. He is taking the night flight to Delhi, and day after tomorrow he will go to Lucknow from there." Tahir Ali sighed and sat down on the sofa. It was then that she noticed his apparent disorientation.

"Daddy, what is it? Is everything all right?"

He handed her the long telegram from his manager.

Laila read it twice, and paled. She was silent for some time. Sattar brought tea and placed it on the table.

"Courageous elephant girl, cheer up!" Pinky had said to her a few days earlier while explaining the seriousness of the Mandir-Masjid case.

Courage is of different kinds and has differing sources and aims. We have the courage to protect our property and bear the loss of our wealth. Yet we do not understand the courage of those reckless boys or girls who are called rebellious, revolutionaries, terrorists or mujahids. And challenging them the police and armed forces, too, faced death fearlessly. "Daddy, I will just freshen up and come back."

In the Ladies Room, she suddenly remembered the letter she had written to Pinky. Arshad Mamu had left. She was afraid it might fall into someone else's hands, so she tore it up. Threw the pieces of paper into the waste-paper basket. She felt the sandal calendar

and it was there. I will have to make a trunk-call to Pinky once I get home and explain my project regarding Safia Khala. A Christian ayah was sitting as silently as the Queen's statue. During the time of the memsahibs, her mother used to sit in the same spot.

She smiled and offered Laila a clean towel and some soap.

I should also be launching the new sandal soap.

In the lounge, her father was still sitting in the same position. After his brother's death, he had become very faint-hearted. He became tearful again.

"Buck up, Dad."

"Yes, absolutely," he tried to smile. "I will go tomorrow morning. Chakravarti is also coming along."

"Me, too."

"You! That's out of the question."

"Have I not always been the fearless jungle girl?"

"That's right, but you must stay here with your mother."

"I will call Pinky as soon as I get home and tell him I'm going. And Hari says that conditions are better now. Look here," she gave him the telegram.

"Only if Pinky allows you to. You are now engaged to that respectable man."

"Pinky? What sort of old-fashioned crap is that, Pop? Does that worthy young man seek my permission when he travels in connection with his contracts? I will go to the Middle East to study the perfume market there."

"Daughter, don't get onto the warpath from now. You have seen the result of Romila Bose's stubbornness," he took a handkerchief out of his pocket.

The tea had gone cold. Sattar, displaying the same loyalty and thoughtfulness as Henry Leigh's huqqa bearers, was standing outside the door. Laila called out to him, and he came in immediately and carried the teapot away.

People kept moving around in well-lit rooms. The splendour of the Calcutta Season had increased manifold since independence. Despite an abundance of options for other forms of entertainment,

an excess of a five-star, electronic culture, for the nouveau riche, membership of former British clubs was both attractive and important. Shaikh Tahir Ali was not upset by the assault of the vulgar on the last exclusive bastions of culture. Right now there were other reasons for his anxiety and sorrow.

A few minutes later he lifted his head. "Daughter, I have something to say to you."

Laila's heart stopped beating for a moment.

He is upset with my arguments. If you want to stay independent, so be it, but as punishment, I am postponing your wedding. Come on, show me your courage, make up for the loss of the elephant forest with your sandal forest.

The wedding, in any case, had to be postponed. Would I, for my happiness, leave him alone and go to Lucknow at this delicate juncture?

And what about those three loafers who, for their own selfish ends, had gone off to America, leaving their old father to face these problems?

Anyway, it's daughters who stand by their parents, so that is what I will do.

"I have arrived at the conclusion that my grandfather should never have left the village of his forefathers," said her father.

What is his grandfather doing here at Tollygunge Club? Suddenly the tension was dispelled, and she laughed.

"If my ancestors had lived and died in their village, what peaceful lives they would have had! Their women, too, would have been obedient and safe in purdah."

Laila smiled affectionately. Good old Dad.

"Lord knows which of our ancestors, indifferent to the future, had come to the city."

"Shaikh Abdur Rahim!"

"Oh ho, daughter. You have learnt a lot!"

"Vicky Mamu told me. Abdur Rahim, facing hard times, left Bijnor and went to the court of Akbar to try his luck. Akbar appointed him Subedar of Awadh."

"And then look what happened to his descendants! He should

never have left Bijnor. Which other people left their villages at that time?"

"Why? Didn't people travel to trade in silk and brocades, perfumes, sandal, spices, diamonds from Golconda! Let alone for adventure."

"Yes, and they had to face hard times."

"And they travelled with the King and his forces...!"

"That was the problem, daughter. They took their forces and marched for the sake of victory and spoils. That was terrible."

Daddy is very pessimistic right now. And so he should be.

"After the fall of Lucknow, our ancestors settled in Kursi. They should have remained in that quiet corner."

"Daddy, Pinky was telling me that only idiots live in Kursi. Don't tell anyone about Kursi in future."

Shaikh Sahib smiled and placed his hand on his daughter's head. "Pinky, Pinky! Very soon I will send you permanently to Lucknow. And you can also tell Pinky that Abdul Halim Sharar was a Shaikhzada from Kursi."

"Okay."

"And always obey Parvez, unlike Romila Bose.... Arrey, Sattar?

"Huzoor."

"Why did you leave your village and come here?"

"Huzoor, I was born here in Calcutta."

"Then you were born in the wrong place."

"Dad, let's go home."

Outside, Victoria Memorial was sitting on the steps, watching the goings-on.

"Good night, Vic," said Laila.

Like Pitras' dogs belonging to sahibs, it gave a friendly yap.

Cars were parked on the long driveway of the Club. A young 'puppie', wearing an elegant suit, got out of his car. "Namaste, Shaikh Sahib, hello Miss Ali."

"Hello, Chaddha." They spoke to him for a bit and moved on.

The headlights of a car lit up the trunk of an old tree and then passed. Shaikh Sahib walked towards the tree.

"Arrey, arrey, Daddy, don't go into the dark."

"February 6, 1792," the Shaikh read. "I saw this inscription today. Was it hidden by this creeper? Some drunk army officer passing through here on his return from a Calcutta theatre must have carved it with his pen knife...."

"Colonel Tolly and Anna Marie Tolly....?" Standing in the dark under the rustling trees, she remembered suddenly that she had told Fali in Shirin Castle that she was used to the old British ghosts of Calcutta.

"February 6, 1792," Shaikh Sahib repeated. "The first anniversary of the victory at Seringapatnam. There had been great celebrations at the Calcutta theatre—balls, banquets and so much illumination that the native population turned out in full force to watch."

"The native population has always been a strange being."

"Tipu's flag was lowered for the Company flag. All the leaders were wearing white satin gowns on which was embroidered, February 6, 1792, and Nawab Sadat Ali Khan participated in the celebration along with Lord Cornwallis. As a chamcha."

Laila smiled. "Who was he?"

"A chamcha, hai, hai, toady, hai hai."

At the moment he is very disturbed. He has been drinking all evening.

"The dead Hindustan's Muslim rulers joined the English against Tipu. Daughter, what is the most historical date in this country's history? May 6, 1799." He wiped his nose with a hanky.

A few cars passed by.

"Colonel MacDowell divested him of his sword. Colonel Walten took his pocket watch and the binoculars that the martyr carried with him to the battleground. And a studded medallion on which was written, Asad Allah al Ghalib."

"Mirza Ghalib?"

"No, stupid, that was the appellation for Hazrat Ali, the lion of Allah. And the walking stick with a golden handle, the plume and jewels, the studded broach were looted from his palace by officers

who had them broken down to make ornaments for their wives and daughters. His priceless library was looted and all the books taken to London. Tipu used to keep his books very carefully in a trunk."

Notes of a piano came from the Club.

"And they found a toy pipe-organ in the palace in which a tiger had knocked down a European. When the organ was played, the tiger roared and the European groaned," Tahir Ali's voice sounded like the serious low notes of the organ and got lost in the sounds of the piano.

"I have seen all these things in a museum in London. Very Sad. But Daddy, which ruler has received so much devotion and love? Thousands of rural Karnataki Hindus make offerings at his grave and seek boons."

"He was a wali, a saint. Whatever he dreamt, he wrote down in the morning, along with the date. He used to write: Oh, merciful one, Oh helpful one, Oh Protector. He kept these locked up because he was careful that no one saw what he wrote. Even in his sleep, he drew up battle plans to defeat the British. He often saw the Prophet in his dreams and Hazrat Ali, too. He dreamt about the seven saints and he mentions their names—Khwaja Yusuf Hamdani, Khwaja Bayazid Bistami, Khwaja Abul Hasan Khirqani, Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshbandi, Khwaja …."

"Listen, Daddy …."

"Major Betson broke open the drawer of his French writing table and found his book of dreams. He sent it to the Court of Directors saying, I am dispatching the amazing diary which shows that Tipu Sultan was fighting with us even when he was asleep."

He strolled up to his Maruti.

"Tipu and Ghulam Muhammad are two symbols," he announced. "The defeat of India's military society and the victory of British commercialism." He sat down on a bench. "Ghulam Muhammad understood the spirit of the age and became a part of the trading empire of the victors. He was India's first Yuppie, like today's billionaires!"

A lakh, a crore, arab, kharab, sankh, mahasankh, padam, mahapadam.

If Parvez and Farhad were to get the contract to build the palace of Al Qamus and Al Chaush, they could have streams of French perfume and sandalwood floors in it. Oh, merciful one, Oh helpful one.

"A Tipu Sultan university, how many technical colleges could have been built by this Trust."

Father sounds like Maulana Hali at this point.

"But, daughter, why should we do things which are out of character? We will only create conditions for rickshaw-pulling. And we have made his grave into a dargah."

"Pop, Shehla Appi says that doubts about the legitimacy of unusual marriages are often raised in fights over the ancestral property of the deceased. This is how we won our small lawsuit. And why just property, Abbajan—how legitimate are the claims made over the division of countries, of rivers, and mountains? You do remember the story about Hazrat Rabia of Basra, don't you?

"No, madam, why don't you tell me."

"Vicky Mamu said that once Rabia of Basra gave a man a dirham to go and buy a sheet for her. The man went but soon returned, asking what colour she wanted. She took the coin back and threw it into the Dajla and said that the moment one thinks of property, differences arise."

Shaikh Tahir Ali thought for a while. Then he said, "Vicky Miyan lives in Utopia. You, too, should throw your passport into the Hooghly."

"Babajanov, your contentious enlightened community has made two Dar ul Ulum in Deoband. That reminds me, I have to make a trunk-call to Lucknow regarding Arshad Mamu, immediately. It is secret, and I am not going to tell you or Ammi about it. Where has Abdul Majid disappeared!"

"You well-educated Muslim youth either become leftists or extremists who are totally indifferent to the community."

"Yes, and the trips to Chicago. Abba Huzoor, this is the spirit of the times."

"None of you can see the middle path." He started pacing again. Then he stopped and declaimed loudly, "Oh, merciful one, Oh helpful one, Oh Protector!"

Then he started speaking again. "Since 1972 till today, innumerable Dinar houses and thousands upon thousands of mosques have been built in Kerala. How many of these are three-storeyed and air-conditioned? If hospitals and schools had also been built for the benefit of the faithful...."

"Pop, you should enter politics like Qambar Chacha. But even if you became a leader, obviously you would not join the CPM. Like many other Indian Muslim leaders you too, would want to maintain the status quo. Otherwise your leadership would be in danger. Who has made culture the monopoly of the bhadralok?"

"Daughter, I notice that in addition to Pinky Mirza, you have also been influenced by his Vicky Mamu. And you have started speaking excellent Urdu."

"Thank you, Abba Huzoor."

He laughed heartily at that. Wiped his tears and looked around. "Perhaps Abdul Majid has gone to say his night prayers." He looked around again and said, "The enlightened community is alive. We go to the Club, and they go to the mosque. It seems it was with me in mind that Akbar Allahabadi said, 'Shaikh, what prayer should I dance to in the ballroom!'"

"Is that another dilemma, Pop? You sent your three sons to the West. Why didn't you send them to Deoband?"

"You are right. If they do not come back from America, then the right to the fruits of this pagoda tree are yours alone. When the rebels take it over, will you truly be happy? Or if you do not take Red Rose back from the slum-dwellers?"

"Pinky asked me this, too."

"What did you say?"

"Daddy, there are some fundamental questions the answers to which we avoid all our lives. How can I tell you now?"

Abdul Majid came running back from the Tipu Sultan mosque.

In front of the show window of the Tollygunge station, stood one of 'Calcutta's half-castes' wrapped in an old overcoat and a discoloured scarf. Her thin white hand was placed on the plate glass wall and she was looking in amazement at the modern abstract painting displayed inside, for sale. Or perhaps she was looking at something else. The old Eurasian woman was also a memory of that same picturesque British period which modern Bengali artistes had so dexterously painted in the tunnels of the Esplanade metro.

The lit globes of the park were looking yellower with the weight of the polluted atmosphere.

The mist began to float over the lake. The entire city of Calcutta had become yellow from all sorts of atmospheric and other impurities.

14
Daughter of the Mountains

THE fourteenth night of the lunar month, puranmashi—a full-moon night.

The moon, peeping through the cypress trees, looked like one of those romantic scenes printed on artificial velvet, that enthusiasts brought back from the Middle East and decorated their walls with.

Safia Sultan strolled on the deserted veranda of her school. Desks lay around haphazardly. Classes were held in two shifts, yet there were no more vacancies and requests for admission, backed by recommendations of ministers, kept piling up. Safia Sultan planned to start another branch of St. Sofia Convent in Dalibagh for which she had rented a house. If there hadn't been all that trouble over Red Rose, construction of her Red Rose Kindergarten would have begun by now. This morning she had sent for the painter to do the signboard for her Dalibagh school, but she still hadn't decided on a name.

Popular idioms are very durable. In British times, people called the foreign nuns who ran convent schools, bhagtins, and the schools, bhagtin schools. The fake convent schools established after Independence continued to be bhagtin schools for the people, in the same way as Indian governors and their wives continued to be called Laat Sahib and Lady Sahib.

And Safia Sultan was no less than any strict mother superior. However, she had to have her bhagtin school registered tomorrow, but had yet to decide on a name.

There was no point expecting any help from her sister, her brothers or their children. They, in fact, were already extremely embarrassed by St. Sofia Convent and had left Safia to her own

devices. She had paid the price for ignoring medical advice.

Anyway, people like me do manage to survive. She went on to the roof of the portico with its high arches built in the Lucknow style and looked around at the familiar sight, now drenched in bright moonlight. The orchards, the white dome of Moti Mahal and the river Gomti below.

Vicky Miyan and Shehla's cars were parked just below. The rickshaw carrying Bela and Chandni Begum had come in through this very gate. Batasha, taking them to be poor visitors, had unloaded their luggage and left it outside.

"Beta," Nuran broke her chain of thoughts. "Bashir painter has been waiting for you for some time."

"He has come now, at midnight? We will put up the signboard at Dalibagh tomorrow."

"He came in the morning, but you had asked him to come back in the evening."

"All right, then. I'll meet him in a while."

Nuran turned back. Safia went and stood on the stone balcony. Other private schools had grabbed almost all the Roman Catholic saints. Parveen Baji had recently told her that a Gulnar Convent and Academy had opened in Lahore. Another called Sun Joseph. Amazing! That day Bela had laughed sarcastically at this trend. We were all in Amma's room and presuming Chandni was not one of us, we made her sit on the low stool. A couple of times Bela had even addressed Chandni as Monie. Amma had asked what sort of name was Monie.

Monie, Mona, Santa Monica....

Feroza had once sent a picture postcard from Santa Monica, California.

That strange, insignificant, ordinary girl had stayed as a guest in the house for three months.

Who was whose guest?

What sort of girl was she? Unusual, homeless, bewildered, with features that looked Nepali, wearing thick spectacles, bent over the sewing machine, rapidly turning its handle. Or sitting beside the tap

in the courtyard doing her ablutions. She just did these two things, sew or pray.

White plastic bangles, pink rubber slippers, thick artificial saris, an ordinary black shawl.

Like the wagtail. Like the kharincha which comes down from the hills as soon as it is winter and then flies away again.

Who had sent her here? That absurd girl. Her useless life. Her meaningless death. And when is death ever meaningful?

Who was she?

A daughter of the mountain. A girl who came from the mountains.

A daughter of the mountain, that is a girl meant for great sorrow, trials and tribulations.

A daughter of the mountain, meaning an echo.

What was she an echo of?

The voice of the mountains.

That innocent hill girl—quiet, intelligent and long-suffering. When she laughed, she laughed like a child. How wronged and aggrieved, and yet patient and grateful. Saint Chandni—Saint Monie—St. Monie's Convent, Dalibagh.

"Nuran," she called out loudly, "send the painter."

"Adab, Bitiya Sahib."

Safia bent her head to acknowledge the greeting, which is the manner of the high-born. "Give me that board, I will write it for you."

Bashir the painter took out white paint and a brush from his canvas bag and sat on his haunches under the light bulb.

Safia took a pencil from the desk and wrote clearly—St. Monie's Convent, Dalibagh.

"Beta, shall I paint it at home and bring it tomorrow morning?"

"All right."

He picked up the board and his bag and left.

Now I am finally liberated from Chandni Begum. Freedom. Deliverance. She heaved a sigh of relief and went and stood on the balcony again. She hadn't heard the voice for a long time. Pinky's analysis and the doctor's diagnosis were correct. It was just hysteria, melancholia. The mischief of her subconscious.

She moved to the stairs to go down. Suddenly the voice said, "Asalamalekum." Aghast, she approached the stairs. It was dark downstairs.

She negotiated the stairs as if she were descending into a blind-well. She passed through the corridor. Saw a bright light in Shehla's office. The successful and satisfied lawyer was busy with her clients as usual.

Safia reached the back veranda and then the courtyard. In the corner, the tap at which Chandni would sit for her ablutions was dripping. Hidden in the green, fragrant leaves, the guavas glistened in the moonlight, like a bright green and yellow painting made by a child. *Alif* for amrud, *Be* for Bela, *Ch* for Chandni.

The tap kept dripping. Must send for the plumber tomorrow.

Vicky Miyan had had the servants' veranda razed and built a beautiful cottage for his son, Tony. Ilaichi Khanum, Batashan Bua and Waziran were dead. Khush Qadam Bua and Sona Kali now slept upstairs in one of the school rooms. Nuran lived outside with her husband, Batasha.

Slowly, Safia walked towards the gate. It was through this gate that Maggie had run away with the eunuchs.

The door is locked, Little Sir Echo informed her. She walked a few steps more. *I'm telling you not to go. The door is closed*, Little Sir Echo repeated.

She reached the gate. In the cracks of the moss covered wall, some fresh mustard and peepal plants had taken root. There was a lock in the massive, dark doors. She smiled bravely. The prediction was only regarding this door. When was I going to be escaping through it?

She returned to her room and switched on the lamp on the table. Took out the brand new register for the Dalibagh school and sat down. The window opened on the outside. A car started in the portico.

One client had left, but another was still there because Shehla hadn't left her office.

Sitting in her room, Safia kept track of the presence and

activities of all the family members. If a door slammed, she would know that Zarina Bajiya was in a bad mood. The sound of Vicky Miyan's footsteps, Pinky's comings and goings, the jangling of Rani Dulhan's keys and the whirlwind movement of her three sons, Salima's graceful gait, Shehla's briskness, the moving about of the Shehla's maids. Safia knew exactly how far someone was, and what they were doing.

This evening there were two clients, one had left, and one was still there. Suddenly the voice said, *Chhote Khalu.*

Safia was stunned.

A little while later, contrary to practice, Shehla came into her room. Safia usually met members of the family thrice a day, around the dining table. Everyone was always busy in their affairs. She too was preoccupied with her school. Hesitantly, her older niece addressed her.

"Chhoti Khala...."

"Yes."

"Come out with me and meet a new client of mine and tell me what you think of him."

The voice again repeated, *Chhote Khalu.*

Her hands and feet went numb. That day she had heard Pinky say these very words to Laila in the baradari. After some wavering, she stood up and went with her niece to her chambers.

A well-dressed man with thick grey hair got up from the leather chair and wished her.

"Chhoti Khala, Sayyid Arshad Hussain. Brother-in-law of Mr Tahir Ali Sarosh, that is, Laila's Mamu. He will be following up on the Mandir-Masjid lawsuit. That is why he has come."

"Please sit down," Arshad Hussain said as if he were the host and she the guest. Safia liked his self-confidence. She sat down.

"Arshad Sahib, my Khala is a well-known educationist. She has two MAs and a PhD.

"Hoon, hoon," Arshad Hussain smiled with the pipe in his mouth.

"Khala, one of your MAs is in Arabic, and the other one?"

Safia was irritated. Am I being interviewed? And this girl doesn't even know which subject my second MA is in? Signs of disquiet appeared on her face. She kept silent for a while and then said, "What is the point of telling him all this?"

"No, Chhoti Khala, these people from Calcutta think we are extremely conservative. Satyajit Ray came here and went to visit an old locality, he was surprised to find Begums who spoke English fluently. Perhaps he thought that we were still the 'chess players'. Arshad Sahib, my Khala has a doctorate in education!"

"Mashallah, mashallah. This St. Sofia School is yours?"

This was an unexpected situation. Hilarious, unique and at the same time ridiculous. In any case, the voice had warned her a little while earlier about this pleasant situation. A slight smile appeared on her face.

"Dr Sahib, I am also planning to open a school for the children of my factory workers in Kanpur. Come and have a look at the place. Your suggestions will be extremely valuable."

"Certainly."

"Arrey, Khala is planning to open a kindergarten, too. And tomorrow another branch of her school is about to open in Dalibagh."

"Mashallah, mashallah. Congratulations! Dr Sahib, please come and have dinner with us tonight."

Safia looked nervously at her niece.

"Come on, Chhoti Khala. Arshad Sahib is inviting you. All of us will go."

"Even Vicky and Bajiya?"

"Everyone. Pinky will come straight to the Carlton. Come on, my sweet Chhoti Khala!"

So this dinner had been decided upon earlier.

"Now go and get ready quickly. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you about it earlier. Arshad Sahib and I were busy discussing this lawsuit."

When she left the room, Shehla was praying that Arshad Sahib hadn't noticed Safia's worn-out Kolhapuri chappals. Even though they were covered by all the dust and muck of Gonda and Bahraich, Chhoti Khala hadn't discarded them. Out of loyalty and in defence

of her aunt, Shehla laughed a mortified laugh and said, "These academics are lost in their own world."

"True, they are an unusual type. Quite delightful...."

"Just don't ever address her as Dr Sahib."

"All right, I won't. But why?"

"Because here people had started referring to Dr Safia's School. Like Dr Saifi's tooth-powder. She, and we, were extremely unhappy about that. Besides, she says these days PhDs are a dime a dozen."

"Dr Saifi's tooth-powder! Ha ha ha, or Dr Sondhi's Marriage Bureau, matches upon matches!"

"Yes," Shehla laughed out loud. "But I think she likes the idea of this match!"

"I'm glad!! She is a sensible lady. Perhaps she doesn't communicate well with people."

"I hope Romila Bose wasn't like her?"

"Oh, not at all. She was extremely talkative. But then she had had a mystical experience of the divine, and after an experience like that, people fall silent."

"Khala prefers to stay quiet without any mystical experience, but I'm sure you will get along with her. She needs a true friend, and none of us has had time for her. All right, gentleman, you come along and sit with Bade Mamu while I go and tell Ammi and Mumani Dulhan to get ready."

Safia came into her dressing-room. She was quiet, and her hands and feet were cold. For the first time in twenty-eight years the voice had given her good news.

She sat in front of the dressing-table. This was her mother's dressing-room which she now used. The departed lady's things were still there, as they used to be. Her betel box in which Safia kept the keys to the wardrobe was placed on a carved Davenport. She got up and took the keys out. She remembered that her late Mamu, before he died, had sent his share of her trousseau. Those gifts were still safe in the godown.

She smiled and opened the almirah. Which sari should I wear?

Shehla parted the curtain and came in. "Chhoti Khala, what did you think of him?"

"All right."

"Arrey, only all right? First tell me, did you even like him?"

"Yes, he is all right."

"Not just all right, Chhoti Khala. He is very nice. And how strange that he lives so close by, in Kanpur, and we've never met him."

"What does he do?"

"Manek Khala calls Sarosh Sahib Mr Elephant Man, so this one is Mr Horse Man. He has a leather factory in Kanpur. He produces saddlery which he exports to Germany and Canada."

"Why hasn't he been married?"

"Arrey, he was," Shehla said, standing in front of the wardrobe and examining the saris. "A civil marriage with a Bengali artist called Romila Bose. That, as Manek Khala would put it, went on the rocks. Divorced, no kids. Look Khala, wear the Venkatagiri, this one. Green, with a red border. It's very artistic. Kept like this here, they will just fall apart. Why don't you wear them? Don't pull your hair into a teacher-like knot. Make a loose bun and let Arshad Sahib see how smart my aunt is. So you liked him?"

"Yes."

"Everyone likes him. We only had to ask you."

Adabarz, ha ha ha, a little guffaw.

Safia held on tightly to the edge of the dressing-table.

Shehla took out a Venkatagiri sari and put it on the chair. "Wear a green shawl. For god's sake don't use the red doshala from the time of Mother Eve. Ammi has already told you to stop using it."

"Everyone likes him, and I'm so glad that you approve of him too," Shehla said. "I will take him to meet Bobby Mamu tomorrow. I called him yesterday, and he was very happy with the news. He is even prepared to attend both weddings."

"Oh ho, which is the second wedding?"

"Pinky and Laila, you do know about that! Listen, Bobby Mamu has had two heart attacks. Why don't all of you forget the

past unpleasantness? Vicky Mamu has been to see him a few times. Human life is short."

"You've discovered that today?"

"Chhote Mamu is even going to have bypass surgery."

"Whole lives get by-passed."

Ya Allah, she is so weird. It's been fine till now, hope she doesn't get into any unnecessary arguments with Arshad Sahib over dinner. He is worldly-wise and diplomatic. He gauged her temperament immediately.

"All right, I am now going to check on Mumani Dulhan. She takes forever to get ready."

A south Indian sari with a broad border, a loose bun, a kundan pendant around her neck, Safia Begum looked at herself, head to toe, in the full-length mirror.

I plan to open a school; your suggestions are precious....

Helpless, enraged and trembling in distress, she moved towards the door and her eyes fell on the green sandals that Shehla had selected for her. She kicked them aside and out of sheer spite, draped the worn-out red doshala which her family was so critical of, around her, and left the room.

She felt the great cheer around the house. Shehla had probably told everyone about it already. Maids were running around; doors were being opened and closed, closed and then opened. Waves of perfume wafted in from all directions as if Zarina, Rani Dulhan, Shehla and Salima had together poured decanters of French perfume over themselves. Nuran passed through the veranda, humming. Peals of laughter rose from the drawing-room where Vicky Miyan and Arshad Hussain were sitting. Safia went into her room and stood by the window. A little while later Shehla's car left, Arshad Hussain in front, Salima, Bunny and Jimmy on the back seat.

Safia came back into the gallery.

Zarina emerged from her room in a purple silk gharara, a pashmina shawl, her face glowing with delight. She looked at Safia. "Ready? Well done! But you're wearing that old worn-out doshala again! Safia, he is a stranger who is about to become a son-in-law of

the family. What will he think? Why this parsimoniousness? Why let people think you are something that has just climbed down the peepal tree? Ain? Don't you have any other shawls? Let me give you one. Nuran...."

"No," Safia refused to budge.

"Fine, then attach two horns to your head too, and wear boots. All right, go and sit in the car and blow the horn. Only then will Dulhan come out."

Quietly, Safia moved towards the portico.

Zarina called out to Bahar Ara Begum whose marriage to Vicky Miyan had been nothing short of a miracle for her family; the engagement immediately followed by the wedding. Her poor parents had decked her out with jewellery made of flowers when they sent her over. After her granddaughter's wedding, Ilaichi Khanum had not returned from the village, and a pension had been fixed for her.

Allah is omnipotent!

She called out to Nuran, "Arrey, call Rani Dulhan."

"Bajiya, I am coming."

Rani Dulhan came out wearing a violet gharara suit, a shahtoosh shawl, diamond earrings in her ears and red glass bangles around her wrists.

The sisters-in-law went and stood in the doorway. The family's confidant, the moon, appeared to check what was going on. There were tears of joy in Zarina Sultan's eyes, and she felt that the moon, in its cheerful naughtiness, winked at her.

"Hasn't your husband finished with his make-up?"

Rani Dulhan began to laugh. "He is speaking to Laila in Darjeeling."

"Oh ho! Since she returned from Mysore, there has been no letter or news from her, she calls now, a fortnight later! She hasn't even written to Pinky."

Zarina had already started behaving like a mother-in-law.

Wearing a black sherwani and churidar pyjama Vicky Miyan emerged, pleased and exultant.

"What happened...."

"Arrey, Bajiya, those people are in great distress because of the troubles in Darjeeling. They have lost a fortune. Thank God at least they are safe."

"Arrey, they should have informed us...."

"Laila was saying that before they left for the Dooars, she tried calling us several times at night from Calcutta, but they couldn't get through. Then her father got busy with trunk-calls to his sons who live in three different cities in America. Now they're coming here to attend their sister's wedding and to take care of matters."

"Thank God, the poor girl was so overwhelmed, dealing with all this by herself," Rani Dulhan said.

"Laila said the area had been completely cut off because of the disturbances. When I gave her the good news, she was speechless."

"Did she say anything?" Zarina wanted to know.

"She constantly asked, who with? Who with? I had to scream and tell her, Shehla! The line was unclear, and I think she wasn't expecting it. Her Mamu and Shelly were both confirmed bachelors, and then this sudden decision. It's just that they clicked. Bajiya, Shah Sahib is in a hurry regarding the wedding. He has to go to Europe. Now the weddings of Shelly and Pinky, in quick succession...."

Still talking, the three of them sat down on the divan.

*

Safia half-heartedly blew the horn a couple of times, then leant against the car window, looked out and was lost in the moonlit night.

The telephone rang in Shehla's office and Tony answered. "Yes, thank you. There will only be family and family friends. Everyone is reaching Carlton, so please come there. Yes, Miyan Abba is about to reach there directly...."

Safia sat back, relaxed, on the back seat of the car, stretched her legs and took off her chappals. She wriggled her toes, then put on her chappals again. Family and family friends, engagement dinner, the correct social behaviour. It is surprising how proper Vicky has

become. The well-turned out and well-trimmed elder, guardian of the 'bride'. The responsible and well-behaved 'Esquire'. In looks, voice, speech, manner of walking and his grave, deep-throated grunts, he has become exactly like Miyan Abba. Like him, he will sit on Abba Miyan's comfortable chair, give orders and supervise arrangements.

Shehla-Arshad, Pinky-Laila, Feroza-Brian.

Though finally Feroza was unsure of the white man.

She changed sides and scratched her nose.

Wouldn't it be fun if Parveen were to send word that her beloved daughter, for the sake of Pinky, had said goodbye to Brian Moreland just when Laila arrived here on her camel?

Ha ha ha, the voice laughed gently.

A crested lark flew screeching in the sky.

More celebrations soon to come.

The creeper on the portico trembled in the wind, and a dry woodrose fell gently on the coloured chabutra.

Yellow roses dry up in the sun and look like flowers carved out of plywood. God's power, and what powers! A wooden rose! Vicky has become old but philosophical, as interested in the constellation of the Bear and its daughters as ever. What else does a man with nothing else to do, do? Philosophise about free will and predestination. This and that. Aayen baayen shaayen.

Bajiya got married and came back home. Neither the will nor the power, only her husband's stubbornness. The poor thing, with what pomp and splendour was she married in the fort—addha carriages at the gate, chariots, sedans, elephants, the Bentley and God knows which other cars that guests came in. Now no one remembers their names nor the make of their cars. The British Raj has gone, and so have all those things.

Pinky as the groom, in his yellow clothes, mounted on a horse, will go to Shah Mina for blessings. A celebration. Hadi Maharaj will dance on this chabutra. There used to be a grapevine here. How times change. Parveen had to get married via trunk-call because the groom did not get an NOC. She left from this portico,

weeping bitterly. When Chhunki and Paro stood on these stairs and sang: 'Why did you marry me off to a strange land...' lamentation broke out. Now when Parveen stands in this portico, she is a different person.

How much she has changed.

All change at the next station.

The continuously repeated announcement on the loudspeakers.

Bobby, dear Bobby, how much you have changed.
My Bonnie over the ocean,
My Bonnie over the sea,
Bring back, O bring back, O bring back
My Bonnie, My Bonnie to me
To me.

A tear fell. When they were young, the brother, playful and loving, entertained the three sisters—English movies, fun trips, noise.

Once they even took us to see the shooting of Bismil ki Arzoo with Akhtari Faizabadi in it, at Ideal Films, next to AIR.

Akhtari had become a myth of their age. Even for Qambar Ali.

River, flow gently. I couldn't go across but Qambar's niece, Laila, the sandal trader, will cross over from Red Rose House and come here. Shehla Appi—your Chhoti Khala has an enormous ego.

My ego.... Mine?

A large tear fell on the handbag kept in her lap, like a wooden rose.

The delicate rose-like yellow flower of this creeper, changed into a wooden rose when the weather changed.

What doesn't change is Safia Sultan. The same sober saris, the same school, the same time-table, the same staff. If one has to be faithful to one's principles, this is how it should be. Well done.

She looked at her feet—full boots, a bone septum ring like the Zulus, horns on the head like the Nagas.

That dandy leather-trader, wearing a leather coat, I can do without the estate that he would have gifted me.

Eccentric—Dame Edith Sitwell, The King of China's Daughter, Under the Nutmeg Tree.

Faraway, a clock struck the hour. A slow winter night.

So much had happened since the evening and yet it is only ten o'clock. What are they discussing inside? This house is full of secrets, like a Freemason lodge of yesteryear, which people called the house of magic. Miyan Abba was also a Free Mason. This house is full of mysteries like an old, empty hill cottage hidden in an apple-laden orchard. All of them are dubious characters. There will be a candle-light dinner. On a cold winter night, an inn covered with shadows. Inside it, a table loaded with heavy silver and red roses, strange rosy, faces at the table. Manek Bai looking like a handbag. Fali would have come wearing his Parsi loose-quilted coat. He always wore it on special occasions—the dugla.

The dugla regiment, there since Dada Miyan's time in the Mohammed Bagh Cantonment.

General and Mrs Khanna will also be there. Who else, with whom the family meets often? The family of Narayan Baksh Singh. The Inam Ali family. And the Kumar Choudhary people. Vicky, the Grand Master of the Lodge, will preside.

I have no friends.

The moon of the cool month of Magh seeped into her. The dew-soaked greenery permeated her being. She could hear cypress trees within her… sar sar sar sar….

When Vicky was a crazy, thoughtful poet, he used to address Chandni as Chandra Prabha, Shashi Kanta, Moonlight Sonata. He would explain to her… "In Dev Mala, Rohini was the wife of the moon god." Those days he was reading Kadambari and would speak in similes and metaphors. Kadambari would come down from Hemkunt to the banks of the Vitrala Nadi. Chandni has come down from the Himalayas to the banks of our river. Arrey Safia, Qasim Sahib has named the new house beside the Gomti, 'Nadi Kinare'. Damn good!

Achcha, Chandni, listen to me. Rajkumar Chandrapid used to live on the moon. I, too, have been bitten by the moon…

And Safia Begum you, like Mahasweta Devi, are sitting by the Achur lake.

And there are parrots all around.

But Mahasweta Devi is a leftist writer from Calcutta.

No. That Mahasweta Devi is sitting beside the Achur lake. All these characters from Kadambari are not strange imaginary creatures. They are us. The parrots inside all of us. All stories are similar, Safia Begum. All humans and their tragedies are similar. Trouble, calamity and affliction do not pick on any particular religion, race or time.

I, Mahasweta Devi, am sitting beside the Achur lake when there are only thirteen years left for the twentieth century to end. On the twenty-fifth day of the new year, I am utterly confounded.

Now, what if the entire world of flora and fauna, birds and beasts, expressions and senses were within me, and if my mind was full of the entire universe? Only cold mud or hot ashes exist in my head. Embers.

Sweet-peas, sunflowers and chrysanthemums lay quietly. Like Chandrakauns, the midnight raga, the moonlight spread out on the pavilion on the roof.

In the middle of those thousands of pavilions enclosed in stone lattice, the begum leans against the cushions. The king and queen listen to Chandrakauns played by the musicians. Behind them are the leaves of the kadam tree and the painted, delicate double-storeyed house with colourful hanging screens, flower vases in the niches, red lotuses, and white ducks in the pond, and a glass and flask in the kings's hand, a flower in the queen's hand, cymbals and tanpuras in the hands of the domnis, their story in liquid gold and other colours, brief and steady till it is consumed by termites. The jasmine creeper covers the pavilions. The domnis, at the requests of the guests singing, 'the jasmine in the garland blooms at midnight … in the garland … ke ke … ke ke … garland … termites … lizards … badger, hyena … around their necks.

Chandni often came and sat on this chabutra to knit. Clean and pure, freshly fallen from a branch. In the big wide world, there was no one to respect and honour her.

Fire, the wind, water and the elements wrote her epitaph.

Vicky had already thought of his epitaph—"All right, Janab, this too has happened. Now, what…?"

Priceless! Whatever Vicky says is unique.

And Shehla Begum …? "My Lord, I now present my brief."

Sayyid Irshad Hussain? "Is sleeping soundly."

Caught up with thinking of a name for the school, I forgot to count the beads asking for mercy at the time of the evening prayers. Tauba, have mercy on me, tauba, have mercy on me, tauba, my Allah, I will count it on my fingers.

Suddenly …

Wearing a black sari, her head covered by one end, a pale-faced woman looking like a porcelain statue appeared on the chabutra lit by moonlight. She bent down to pick up a woodrose and took a good look at Safia Sultan. Her eyes flashed, and it looked as if she had white powder on her face.

"Arrey…." Safia exclaimed. "Bela…?"

She crossed the chabutra rapidly and disappeared into the golden darkness of the garden. Like a cold high wind. A whirlwind. Her gait was strange. She disappeared in a whiff.

Safia was terrified. Thorns seemed to prick her throat and she choked, began to tremble. Broke out in a cold sweat, felt as if ants were crawling up her calves. With great effort she summoned up the courage to call out again—"Bela…."

Her inner voice very gently answered, *Chandni Begum.*

*

Zarina, Rani Dulhan and Vicky called out to Tony from the gallery and the telephone in the office rang. Vicky Miyan went in hurriedly and spoke to Shehla. "Yes, yes, we're coming. We were fixing a date for your wedding. It will just take us five minutes to reach."

Both Begums, delicately holding the bottom of their ghararas, descended the stairs with Nuran following, carrying a shawl and sandals.

The young Tony leapt out into the portico and opened the door of the car. Equally agile, his father quickly sat on the front seat. He turned and glanced back. "Oh ho, Safia has gone off to sleep waiting for us."

Tony blew the horn to wake her up. Zarina opened the rear door of the car. "Get up. Here is a new shawl, it matches the border of

your sari. And take off this wretched doshala, just see me giving it to Angoori tomorrow. Come on, Safia, don't be stubborn."

Safia didn't react.

Vicky turned around. "Why does this matter of shawls have to be sorted out now? Bajiya, let's not delay any longer. Come on, Tony."

The son started the car. "Come on, sit down, Phupijaniya, Ammi."

"Let her wake up first. Bless her, how soundly she sleeps. Come on, get up. Move, so that we can get in, too."

Safia kept reclining on the seat. Zarina called Nuran and gestured towards Safia's feet.

The maid gently removed both Kolhapuri chappals from Safia's feet.

"Throw them outside," the Badi Bitiya thundered. "Tell Angoori to take them away tomorrow morning with the trash."

Nuran obeyed the order with the sound of the chappals hitting the cement floor. Safia lay still with her eyes closed like David's portrait of Madame Recamier. Nuran tried to put a green sandal on her right foot.

Alarmed, she suddenly started screaming.

Zarina and Rani Dulhan shook Safia and then let out frightening shrieks.

*

In the period when her soul had not yet left her body, the picture became clear.

There are canopies of light in heaven. Puppets are acting below them, and all of them seem to be speaking but are saying the same thing. It says in the Upanishads that truth—reality—is one, but with many forms.

*

My Lord, the peepal has grown in such a way that half of it is inside the compound and half outside, but three-fourth of its roots is inside

and the other one-fourth towards the river. Therefore, it should be considered as being inside the compound. My honourable friend has asked what the difference is between imagination and reality?

My Lord, the human face is turned in two directions at the same time. One side lives in the world, the other faces a life in the graveyard at Sitara Begum.

*

In the opinion of the doctors, her heart stopped beating when she experienced a mental shock.

According to the late Safia's neurologist, hallucination could have been one reason apart from the 'inner voice'.

*

In the morning when the funeral party left for the graveyard at Sitara Begum, the cars moved slowly towards the city. There was a huge number of women who turned up at the house. At the suggestion of Manek Bai Dhondy, who was an expert at organising, a microphone was arranged and a loudspeaker installed in the woodrose creeper of the portico so that the car numbers and drivers' names could be announced, just as they were on happier occasions.

Bobby, leaning on his son, alighted from his car. He hugged his older brother and sister and broke down.

On the chabutra adjoining the portico, the Quran was being read. Inside, in the late Safia's room, a white sheet had been spread on the floor. Her sister and sister-in-law, having read the Quran, sat quietly, leaning against bolsters. Visitors would read a chapter of the Quran, leave, and go and sit on the back veranda or in the drawing-room. A few checked out the furniture and arrangement of the other rooms, through teary eyes. Female relatives busy with the arrangements moved around the house.

There was a huge crowd in the living room. There too a white sheet had been spread out on the floor and women were sitting in groups. If they felt like laughing at something they would control themselves and rearrange their faces in the appropriate sorrowful expression.

Conversations. "There are problems in life, and challenges when it's over. Three weddings postponed."

"Has Shehla's husband already been married? His hair is white. He has had to carry a corpse the moment he arrived. Not a good omen."

"Baji, that's enough, keep quiet now."

"I don't see the Bengali daughter-in-law."

"She is in Calcutta. And don't refer to her as a daughter-in-law yet."

"Why not? She has been roaming around with the boy for six months."

"Why have you come in a yellow sari?"

"My mother-in-law doesn't permit me to wear white. I have a sari which is almost white, but it is georgette. I don't have a single winter sari."

"A person should have appropriate clothes for occasions like this."

"I pressed Zarina Sultan to arrange an ijtima gathering for women here. Hamida Begum from the Chicago Centre is visiting home to arrange a match for her son. Zarina Sultan could have invited her to deliver the sermon. But Zarina ignored my suggestion. Have these people turned half-Shia?"

"Not at all."

"Her son has had the Jhankar mosque demolished."

"Not at all."

"That's what I have heard."

"These days in Bombay, Saira Bano and Veena, wearing blouses with long sleeves, go proselytising from house to house."

"Is that so?"

"Hello, ji. Namaste ji. How are you, Sudha Didi?"

"Hello, namaskar Saumeshwariji. When did you hear of Safia Baji's death? I was in the bathroom when Suresh's daddy called out. I was so flabbergasted that I nearly slipped on the soap. It was just the day before yesterday that I had spoken to Safia Baji on the phone."

"The food for this meal is going to come from Shirin Castle. I would have sent the dinner but our gas cylinder has just run out."

"You have only one cylinder?"

"I have three, but mashallah, I constantly have so many guests. I will have it cooked at Ammi's house and bring it over."

"Who knows how many people will be sending food for everyone."

"Shall I have a sweet potato kheer made? It's a seasonal dish."

"There will be enormous amounts of food...."

"I have counted five ministers till now. Poor Shehla had to receive all of them. The men still haven't returned from the graveyard."

"Everyone is coming, but I haven't seen Shabbo Baji."

"Zarina Sultan never went to her house when Shabbo Baji's mother died."

"The ladies from Hashmat Mahal have finally arrived!"

"Now!"

"What airs!"

Suddenly there was a commotion. The call to Karachi had come through.

"Arrey, haan, the unfortunate Parveen might attend the third-day rituals for her sister."

Then a murmur spread—Parveen would be arriving tomorrow evening.

"Is Feroza coming, too? Aye, Sona Kali, is Feroza coming?"

"I don't know, Begum Sahib."

A third bulletin was issued. Feroza was in London.

Some women who had gathered in the gallery the moment they heard about the trunk-call (so that they could hear for themselves the painfully dramatic conversation between Shehla and Parveen), went back because Nuran had closed the door to Shehla's chamber from the inside. Because the world survives on hope, some girls hung around Pinky's telephone in another room, thinking his engagement to the Bengali might be called off. Anyway, whatever is fated for whoever will happen. One of the girls appointed herself to

answer any extraordinary call that might be made on the telephone, while the others went back to the sitting room, to their mothers. Or gathered around a window.

"Arrey, arrey, look! Ila Devi and Aslam Khan."

"Do you know she has come from Madras after finishing a film there. Aslam Khan has come from Bombay. They are shooting at Dilkusha for *Begum ke Heere.*

"Amazing that they have come to condole."

"I'll tell you why. Shehla Baji's fiancé, Shah Sahib, is supplying the horses for *Begum ke Heere.* Let's quietly go outside and take a closer look at them."

"Girls, stop this childishness. Sit down. Quiet."

Manek Bai was sitting under a rear window of the drawing room reading the Avesta. She would lift her head sometimes and look at the female mourners. If some whisper reached her ears, distressed, she would lower her head over the sacred pages. The smell of lemon leaves permeated the area around the window. Some bird hidden in the ancient fig tree whistled.

'Truth is the best of all good, and it is happiness; Happiness is to him who is righteous for the sake of righteousness. You are the holy provider. You are sacred.' She was thinking of the time her husband died and of the deaths of her mother-in-law, Shirin Bai, and sister-in-law, Rhoda Bai. The first morning after death, the soul is in a wilderness. Every evening you have to pray to the angel of death.

The soul's passage on the third day is very painful because it leaves its earthly bonds and reaches the Chinvat bridge.

Tomorrow is the third day for poor Safia. I will have to come here in the morning. So many arrangements have to be made just to live, and then after death, too. Oh, sweet God.

Praying silently, she stood up.

As he had promised, Bashir Painter turned up with the new signboard for 'St. Monie', leaned it against the edge of the pond and just as efficiently, tied a handkerchief around his head and joined the funeral. The non-Muslim teachers of St. Sofia were sitting on the green grass with their heads hung low. Who will run the school

now? At a time when there was an abundance of well-educated girls and a shortage of jobs, one avenue of employment had now closed.

The sun rose high in the sky. A young teacher, slightly impatient, stole a look at her watch.

"Last rites take time," said another as if in response.

The silver river flowing beyond the trees glimmered in the sun.

The river has its own internal clock with its own time cycles. It cares not for the time of others. Mrs Tarla Joshi plucked a blade of grass. She had been a classmate of Safia's at Isabella Thoburn College and was the senior-most teacher in her school. When they were in college, she would sometimes come to this house, and on this very lawn she would address Safia and sing in low tones: 'River, flow gently, my beloved lives across. Flow gently, I have to go across.'

She has finally crossed over.

No one grieved at her death. There was a kind of sympathy for her, and sadness. Everyone repeated the same words, 'Poor thing'. As when someone fails in an exam or doesn't make it to the civil service.

If she had been in public life, they would already have torn her to shreds for being a woman. Now they were writing formal obituaries.

They were crows. Mongooses, vultures, chameleons, alligators, sharks. They were so cruel to others that it was shocking.

But Safia, you, too, spared no one.

She deserves all this.

They take jabs even at those who never belittle others. And Safia wasn't that attractive. Even I am thinking of her as a poor thing. I am wondering, what is there to feel sorry about her? She had a good life, given her nature and her deeds.

Four or five Muslim teachers, having read the Quran, came out and joined the group.

"May Allah give her a place in heaven. She had withheld my salary for three months."

"You were absent for three months, without informing her."

"Who will settle our accounts now? Pinky Miyan or Shehla?"

"Arrey, Kausar Baji, don't bring this up at this time."

"Shamim Fatima, my responsibilities and expenses…."

Tarla Joshi kept watching the people coming and going.

There is another phrase that is often repeated—is there anything I can do? Everything is routine—living, dying, last rites. What a dull routine. A timetable stuck on the notice board of time.

Led by Batasha, a few servants were bringing down chairs from the second floor of the school. Supervising them, Sona Kali passed close by. One teacher immediately got up and said, "Ayah ji, is there anything I can do?"

Suddenly, the afternoon garden turned into a jeweller's shop, gold all around. Emerald and rubies everywhere. Stones of every colour.

The peacocks and parrots on the trees looked as though they were embellished in meenakari. The servants carrying the furniture were disrupting this exquisite and delicate craftsmanship.

"Arrey, Bitiya, if there were one job to be done, I would have told you," answered Sona Kali. "First Badi Bitiya said that the arrangement for men for the third-day rites would be upstairs so I had to have all the school rooms emptied and the chairs and desks removed. Now she says she is superstitious about funeral rites being held in a place where in a few days, may Allah please, Pinky Miyan and Laila Begum will come and live. So she said arrange the chairs downstairs, and we will have an awning put up for the rites here. Now she says don't take the school furniture back upstairs. We will send it straight to the junk market in Nakkhas."

Sona Kali moved on, and the teachers looked up. So that meant St. Sofia would be closed. The new couple will make the second floor their home.

Immediate decisions. Humans have so little time, and if decisions are delayed how will things work? Lost in thought, Tarla Joshi, head bent, kept contemplating her feet. It began to rain

"Tauba, winter rains had to start today! This happens often. The moment a grave is dug, there is slush.Tauba."

"Rain on such occasions is a sign of Allah's mercy, Kausar Baji." Shamim Fatima always wanted to put a good spin on everything.

Everyone got up in a hurry, covered their heads and rushed towards the veranda. The clouds came and went.

The short winter days. The sun set and a cold wind was blowing. Yellow leaves fluttered around. The drivers had been sitting around all day, hiding their cigarettes and bidis with their hands as they smoked. Ram Pyari, the gardener's wife, got ready to clean the garden. She moved the St. Monie's signboard and took out an empty packet of Charminar from behind it. Khush Qadam Bua who was going in, stopped. "Hasn't everyone returned yet?" she asked, as if people were supposed to have returned from a cricket match. Khush Qadam Bua had become senile with age.

People began returning. As mourners they had left, walking slowly; now they hurried back. Many were hungry, and some wanted a cup of tea and a cigarette. Now they would go back to their homes, have a bath and a cup of hot tea.

"You may agree or not, but everyone is thinking the same thing," Khush Qadam Bua leaned against the wall of the pond and muttered. "Just one thought ... unexpressed ... this wasn't my funeral. I am still alive. Gratitude and satisfaction ... unexpressed..."

Ram Pyari sat down on her haunches and began to go through the discarded packets. If there was a cigarette or two left in them, she could take them for the gardener who was readying the fire over which food for the funeral rites would be cooked in cauldrons.

Pinky and Arshad Hussain passed by, and she pulled the end of her sari over her face.

White cotton ghararas rustling, two old African women, slaves born in Hashmat Mahal, emerged. A chauffeur drove a car into the portico and straightened the blue curtains in the windows.

The African women stood like sentries under an arch. Their eyes were the eyes of ancient humans, and they had seen countless endings, individual and collective. Poor disabled Safia Begum did not count. These eyes had seen the whole of Africa devastated. They had even been loaded onto ships and sent east and west. All that nature had given them was good voices. And tough souls.

The places at which platoons of African women had been stationed, guarding the palaces! The Red Fort in Delhi, Nawabi and Royal Lucknow, Asaf Jah's Hyderabad.

Zamurrad and Almas, the last of the black female palace guards. Their great-grandmothers, part of the black regiment stationed at Begum Kothi, had laid down arms in 1858.

And if one looks at changes over hundreds of thousands of years, there is no significance to collective extermination. Only one word is used for them—they 'were'.

As for individuals, they disappear on the third day. For them, too, it's the same word—'was'.

Only the sorrow for Hussain lives on permanently.

Ke hai hai, re hai—ke hai, miyan re—Bibi Sughra cries, my groom Qasim has been killed, hai hai re hai.

The Begums from Hashmat Mahal appeared, accompanied by Zarina Sultan. The black maids descended and opened the door of the car.

Zarina recalled how the late Safia would go with her on the ninth of Muharram to Hashmat Mahal and listen to Zamurrad and Almas and other black maids, standing in a circle and reciting the nohas, beating their breasts in a state of effacement. Ke hai hai re hai—ke hai miyan re.

"The lamentations of these black women," Safia had said once, "echo across deserts and rivers."

Hai, my sad sister, Zarina wiped her tears with her white dupatta. The black maids bent down and wished her and the car moved away.

*

The crowds withered away. Angoori, bent over and carrying her broom, appeared in the portico. Nuran was standing silently on the veranda. There was the sound of tea cups rattling from the dining room, then silence.

The cleaning lady, as was her habit, tied her dupatta around her waist and started sweeping. Sar sar sar sar.

The Kolhapuris were lying upside down under the spreading, wandering-jew creeper, a fat lizard on the soles of one.

"Dhat—dhat—bari—bari" Angoori hit at it wildly with her broom. The lizard leapt and crawled up the wall.

"Arrey wah, you sweepress!" Nuran laughed.

Angoori picked up the chappals and looked at them carefully because her eyesight was failing. "They belong to Bitiya," she said, as she wiped her tears with her dirty dupatta.

Nuran walked down the stairs, and she too looked at the chappals for some time. Then she said, "Sweepress, don't throw them, take them home. Wash them and put them aside in some corner."

A piece of paper was floating in the wind. The cleaning lady caught it wrapped the slippers in it and set them aside.

Suddenly, Nuran remembered Badi Bitiya's words, "Just see me give away this wretched doshala to Angoori tomorrow itself." Momentarily, she was overwhelmed, then said, "You will get Bitiya's red shawl, too."

The dim-witted Angoori kept quiet. She didn't know whether to greet the news with happiness or to be sad. When the property was distributed after the Bade Raja's death, there had been no mourning. Everyone had seemed pleased.

Nuran took Angoori's silence for disappointment. There were cupboards full of Bitiya's clothes. I have no idea whether she will send them to the orphanage or what.

"The shawl is made of old, drawn gold thread; you can deck yourself in it, old crone."

This loyal sweepress and her useless family, had received all kinds of discarded clothes and broken shoes their entire lives. On occasions of celebration, they had been given new clothes. It occurred to Angoori that three weddings were in the offing so there would be lots of new clothes. She stopped sweeping. In the late Barrister Azhar Ali's disputed compound of Red Rose an old emotional bhajan, sung in the Marathi style, was playing over the loudspeakers, 'Beside the river Sindhu, hey Govind, protect me, my life is in danger.'

Nuran started. "The news of Bitiya's death has reached Qambar Miyan's land!"

"Qambar Miyan's land or Laila Bitiya's land?" Angoori corrected her with a finger on her nose.

"And if it is Laila Bitiya's, it means it belongs to our Pinky Bhaiyya." Hearing talk of property, Angoori suddenly became very alert.

"It's Allah's majesty. Whose property has ended up with whom." Nuran was confused again. After a few moments she said, "Sometimes at night when the cowherds there sing the birha for Bibi Fatima, the heavenly lady, you can hear it clearly here."

Kali Nadi. And Jhau Nadi along the banks of which, on moonlit nights, those who want to, can hear the flute playing. And the Gomti is flowing right here. Har har, mother Gomti.

"Today there is the Mahadev Garhi fair at Qambar Miyan's temple."

"Qambar Miyan's temple?" Nuran mumbled again.

"Aye, Nuran Bitiya, winter is almost over. This Basant will you dye two dupattas for my daughter-in-law?" Angoori bent down, placed her hand on her back and began sweeping again. Sar sar, sar sar.

Suddenly there was a heavy silence. Nuran passed her Nepali shawl under her armpit, over her shoulder and tied it behind her. She sat, leaning against a pillar, her face in her hands listening intently to the sound of the sweeping. A little while later, head bent low, dragging her slippers, she headed for the servants' quarters.

*

All characters in the novel are fictitious except for 'Rana Sahib' who is a composite character.

Victoria Memorial and its foreign owner, Rani Badshah Begum, the sons of Tipu and 'Tom Sahib' (Thomas Easley) are real and have been introduced in the story for detail.

Harindranath Chattopadhyay is the brother of Sarojini Naidu. The novelist does not know whether Mana is real or imaginary.

By the same author

River of Fire: a novel
Rs 450
ISBN: 978-93-85606-00-7

Fireflies in the Mist: a novel
Rs 350
ISBN: 978-81-88965-52-6

Street Singers of Lucknow and Other Stories
Rs 350
ISBN: 978-81-88965-53-3

My Temples, Too: a novella
Rs 250
ISBN: 978-81-88965-13-7

Rs. 450

ISBN: 978-93-85606-11-3